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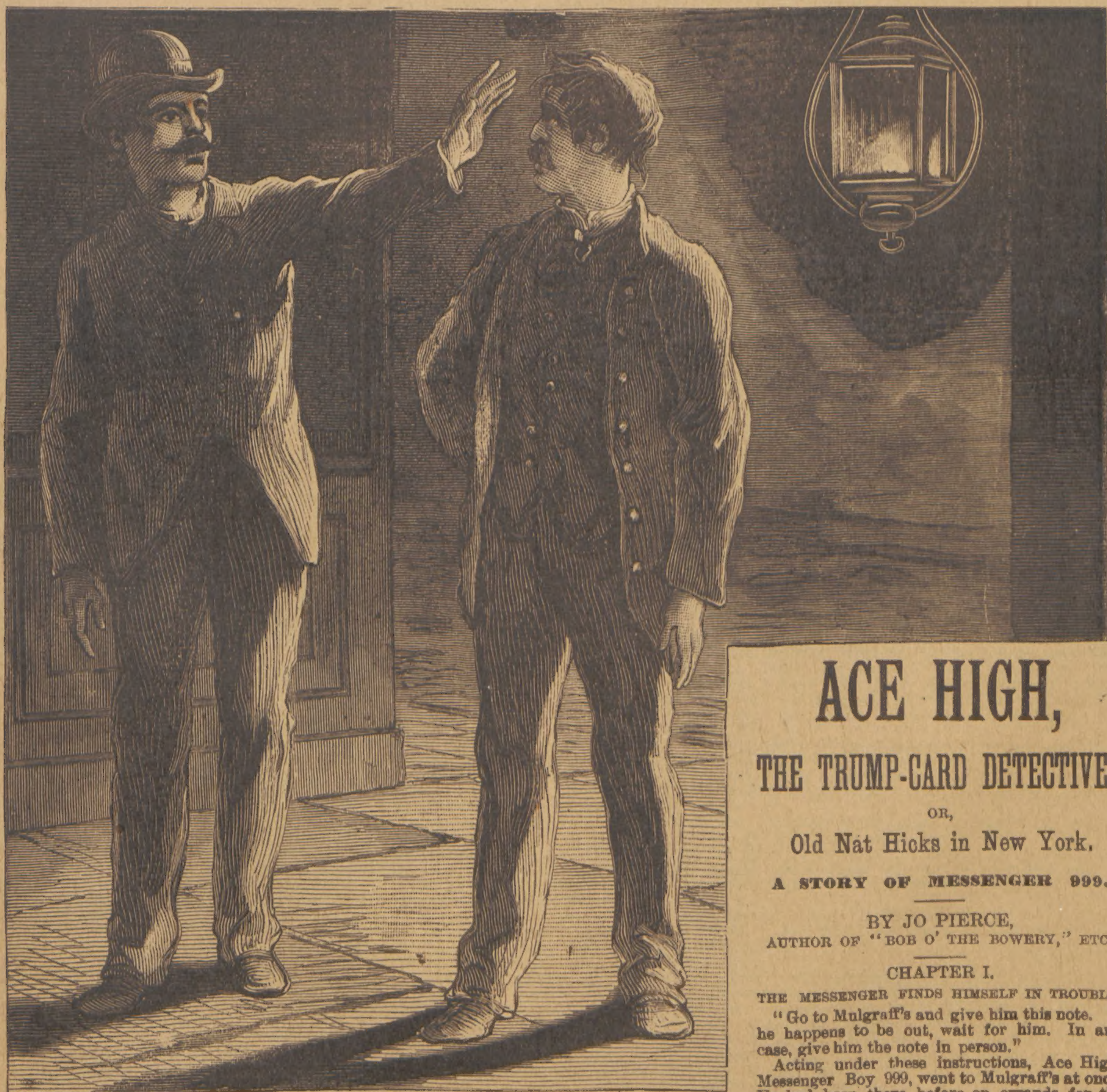
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HE TURNED AND SAW BELLBAR, THE DETECTIVE!

ACE HIGH, THE TRUMP-CARD DETECTIVE;

OR,

Old Nat Hicks in New York.

A STORY OF MESSENGER 999.

BY JO PIERCE,
AUTHOR OF "BOB O' THE BOWERY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MESSENGER FINDS HIMSELF IN TROUBLE.

"Go to Mulgraff's and give him this note. If he happens to be out, wait for him. In any case, give him the note in person."

Acting under these instructions, Ace High, Messenger Boy 999, went to Mulgraff's at once. He had been there before on errands for the same man, and knew the way well.

As far as the general public knew, Mulgraff's was only a saloon, and a very respectable one, too, as such places go. Few persons were ever seen in the bar-room, and there were those who wondered how the place lived. There were others who lost no time in wondering.

Messenger 999, having thought only for business, passed through the front room and unceremoniously opened a small door upon the ornamental glass of which was marked the word, "Private."

Once past this he knocked in a peculiar way upon a second door, which was cautiously opened by a man on the other side. He recognized Ace High at once.

"Hullo, youngster!" he saluted. "On business?"

"What else do you suppose?" the messenger replied.

"We couldn't let you bet."

"Nobody asked you!" was the sharp retort.

"When you hear of me being so green as to blow in money on the races, just say so plain, will you? I'm here on the usual business, with a note to be delivered only to Mulgraff, if I wait all the P. M. for him."

"Oh! all right, my hearty! Don't take offense, but we wouldn't let any boy bet here. Come in!"

Ace High obeyed.

He entered a room well filled with men, and blue with tobacco-smoke. The men were of all sorts and conditions, from the aldermanic-stomached "sport" to the pale-faced, wasp-waisted clerk—wonderful contrast, though sport and clerk were now moved by the same ruling impulse.

At one side was a long blackboard, and upon this were the names of the starters in all the prominent horse-races of the day. A "ticker" was busily recording the results, as race after race was finished and reported, and the men were watching the records with interest more or less painful.

It need scarcely be added that this was a pool-room, and that the chance was open for the persons present to stake their money.

This the greater part were doing, as each event was called, and the house was doing a flourishing business, both in this line and at the inner bar.

Ace High looked at the crowd and at the blackboard with a skeptical smile. The matter possessed no attraction for him. He had been used to active life, hard life, and ways of life that had made him shrewd beyond his years, and he had a fixed opinion of horse-racing on the modern plan.

Without pretending to know, he did not believe that the running races were "on the square." He regarded the whole matter as a conspiracy of a few to defraud the many, and thought that the result of the events was determined in advance so that those in the secret could make money out of the uninitiated.

He had heard others assert the same thing, and, too, had heard believers declare that all was done with strictest honor. Not being a bettor, he did not care, personally, how it was; he never won or lost on the results.

One thing was certain: There were men in that crowd who had no business to be there—low-salaried clerks, and others, who hardly knew a race-horse from a saw-buck, yet were risking their small earnings week after week, and year after year, lured on by the passion for gambling and the thirst for gains which never came.

Ace High was not likely ever to go in with that eager crowd. Naturally sensible and far-seeing, he had the advantage of being a New York boy, born and bred, and did not fall into traps easily.

His real name was Asa High. Years before, some one had made a pun on his name and dubbed him "Ace High, the Trump Card." The name had stuck to him, and many of his public acquaintance had no idea what his actual name was.

Asa was looking over the crowd in an idle way, when he gave a sudden start and muttered:

"He here!"

It was a young man of about eighteen years that had caused the messenger's abrupt increase of interest. He stood in the edge of the group, and was all bound up in the excitement of the hour. His manner and his face were alike feverish, though it was plain that the flush in his face rose from a cause other than mental feeling. He had been drinking heavily, and by far too much for his own good.

A man twelve years his senior approached and slapped him on the shoulder.

"How goes it, Tildrake?" he demanded.

The youth started and wheeled nervously, a look of alarm in his face, whereupon the speaker added:

"You act as if you expected to see an officer. That ought not to be, when your old man is a cop."

"Hush!" was the reply, and the young man looked around nervously.

"What's up?"

"Don't speak of my father."

"Why? You ain't ashamed because he's a policeman, are you?"

"The shame is not on him."

"On whom, then?"

"On me!"

"Nonsense! Why?"

"What would he say, if he saw me here?"

"I know what he would say if he didn't see you—nothing. Come, Harry, take a brace! Don't let the ghost of the old man haunt you all the time. Palmer Tildrake is old-fashioned and strict, but he's been a cop twenty years, and it's grown on him. He means well—"

"My father is all right. Don't mention his name again, sir!"

This was said sharply, and the wily elder man did not fail to profit by the hint. He laid one hand upon his companion's shoulder, and deftly changed the subject.

"By Jove! that was a good race that Red Bat ran!"

"Yes."

"What's up next? Oh! the seven furlongs."

"Yes."

"Who will get it?"

"High Boots."

"Think so?"

"Yes."

"I incline to Nokomo. But say, I'll go you a tinner that High Boots don't win."

"I don't care to bet."

"Oh! your faith ain't so strong, then?"

"It's, but, to tell the truth, Brown, I've backed High Boots heavily already—so heavily that, if she loses, I shall be dead broke."

"That alters the case. Come over and take something."

This was an invitation the young man could not refuse, and he followed Brown to the bar.

Ace High shook his head gravely. He knew Harry Tildrake well, and would have been recognized in return if the race-mad youth had chanced to see him. The former was the son of a policeman, and on the whole force there was not a more honest, worthy man than Palmer Tildrake. Such praise could not be given to Harry. He was sowing wild oats with a vengeance, and all of his father's efforts could not keep him out of bad company.

"Headstrong as ever!" muttered Ace High.

There lay the trouble. Harry did not intend to do harm to himself or any one else, but was doing both, and all of his elders' counsel was thrown away on him.

He wanted to see "life," and was seeing it in full earnest. He was in a whirlpool, and the boat was going fast.

When he had taken another drink, Herman Brown spoke pleasantly.

"Tell you what, Hal, I'll go you twenty to ten that High Boots don't win!"

The youth cast a feverish glance at the line of names on the board. He had great confidence in High Boots, and had been given so-called inside information that the mare was sure to win. His courage was good—too good! It was so strong that he had already risked money on the seven furlongs event which he had no right to risk, and the faint voice of prudence left warned him not to go any deeper.

"You can't expect bigger odds," Brown added.

Harry was not thinking of the odds, but of the money which was in doubt. Unfortunately, his sense of honor was not aroused. Two things, only, occupied his attention—personal risk, and the thirst for gain.

"I'll go you," he answered, in an unsteady voice.

After another drink they went back to the crowd. The room had grown quiet. It was announced that the starters were off in the seven furlongs, and all anxiously awaited the result.

Asa saw that young Tildrake could not keep his composure. The liquor he had poured down his neck served to stupefy, rather than exhilarate him, but his mind was clear enough to make the situation plain to him. His face was pale, and his eyes had a wild gleam.

The ticker began to work, and the marker stepped to the board. With a single sweep of the crayon he marked an oval ring around the

name of one horse; over another he put a figure "2," and over yet another, the figure "3."

High Boots remained unmarked.

She had lost the race, and, also, "place;" she had not even come in third.

Harry Tildrake drew a quick, sharp breath, and then put out one hand vaguely. The motion was one a blind man might have made, and the policeman's son was blind then. He had risked more than his all on High Boots; he had risked what did not belong to him; and the money had gone faster than the mare's legs.

Ruin stared him in the face.

CHAPTER II.

RACE-MAD, AND RACE-BROKEN.

AT that moment the proprietor of the room came in, and Asa hastened to deliver to him the note with which he had been sent there. He was thus occupied for several minutes, after which he was free to go.

He remembered Harry Tildrake, however, and looked for him. The unhappy young man was standing at the bar, and the way he clung to it showed that the liquor he had swallowed was fast overcoming him.

Herman Brown, his evil genius, was by his side, and gave the young man a hearty slap on the back.

"Brace up, me boy!" he advised, heartily. "You'll be out of this in a little while. Tomorrow you will undoubtedly call the turn and pocket the stuff!"

To-morrow! Tildrake shivered as he thought of the morrow. He wished it might never come! If it did, he would not be in Mulgraff's sepulcher of broken hopes and ruined lives. He might be in prison, but was more likely to be a fugitive from justice.

"Take another drink," Brown advised.

The messenger's indignation could be curbed no longer, and he stepped quickly forward and laid hold of Tildrake's arm.

"Harry, ain't you going home?" he asked.

Brown turned sharply upon the speaker.

"Who in perdition are you?" he demanded.

"I know Harry."

"What of it?"

"I think he had better go home."

"Keep your thoughts to yourself. You are not wanted here, anyhow. Get out!"

"I travel on my legs, not on yours!" Asa retorted. "Come, Harry, ain't you going?"

Tildrake was looking at his young friend in a dazed way.

"Are you in the whirlpool, too?" he muttered, vaguely.

"I didn't bet on High Boots, anyway. Come; you have been here long enough."

"I'm ruined. Why should I go? Why not end it all? Have you a revolver, Brown?"

"Don't talk nonsense. Stick under my wing, and I will see you through all right. Who is this kid?"

"I live near Harry's."

"Are you his brother, or guardian?"

"No, but I am—"

"Then get out! I've told you twice; now see that you go. If you don't, I'll report you to your employers. They don't want you loafing in a saloon."

"You're mighty solicitous for the standing between employers and employees, all of a sudden. How about Harry and his bosses?"

Brown's face flushed with anger, and he half-raised his hand as if to strike the bold boy, but prudently refrained from doing so.

Tildrake suddenly aroused.

"I can't go home now, Ace," he remarked.

"Are you going that way?"

"When my day is up."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Don't tell father where you saw me—don't tell him you saw me at all."

"See here, Harry, this isn't just the square thing. You are in mischief, and you know it. I'm not any tell-tale, and don't intend to go to your father; but you owe it to yourself to get away from here. There ain't any good in the place—or in the folks."

Half-unconsciously he looked at Brown as he added the last words, and the latter's anger rose higher than ever.

"If you don't get out of here, I'll pitch you out!" he declared, hotly.

"No, you won't!" retorted Tildrake. "Nobody is going to lay a hand on the boy while I am here. Still, you are in the wrong, Ace. You mean well, but I don't want you hanging around me. Go about your business, and I will come later."

This was kindly said, but Ace saw that Harry meant all that he had spoken.

"All right; it's your affair, not mine; but I advise you to let whisky and betting alone."

He turned away, but Tildrake called him back.

"Be sure not to tell any human being about me," the race mad youth anxiously cautioned.

"I won't; I'm mum."

Feeling that he could do his friend no good, Ace turned and went out of the room.

"Who's that kid, anyhow?" Brown asked, looking after him with a distrustful gaze.

"He lives near me," Harry mechanically replied.

"Probably he'll split on you."

"No, he won't; but what if he does? I'm ruined, as it is, and I reckon the bottom of the North River is the best place for me."

"Nonsense! Don't let me hear any more talk like that. True; you missed it on High Boots, but there's no reason why you should be all split up the back over it. You'll probably call the turn on to-morrow's events, and get back all your stuff."

Tildrake winked hard and tried to clear his vision as he gazed at Brown.

"Herm," he replied, "you led me a pretty dance when you got me interested in running races."

"How so?"

"You started me off on a devil's chase. I've run it well; I've blown in my sugar day after day—and how much have I won?"

"You got a double-X on the gelding, Quiet Tip, and over that figure on—"

"I've won now and then; a baby would be able to do that if it took as many chances as I've done; but I've always lost five dollars where I've made one. More than that, I've gone to the dogs at a gallop. When I came here to-day I was in a hole, and what I staked was to pull me out or ruin me dead. You know what the result has been!"

"But you can raise a few saw-bucks off your friends and go in to-morrow—"

"Will you help me out?"

"I would, Tildrake, gladly, but I took the wrong end yesterday, and am about broke myself."

"Perhaps, then, you'll see the 'friends' you speak of, and help me out at once?"

There was sarcasm in Harry's voice which told how well he knew that he was in the grasp of a human shark, but Brown answered with even composure:

"A man can always work such a raffle best himself. Go right to the boys and strike them, and you'll be all right. As for me, I owe a bill of half a century over on the East Side, and I must go and pay it. I'll see you to-morrow, old boy. So-long!"

And Mr. Brown waved his hand affably and walked out of the place.

Young Tildrake looked after him in bitterness of spirit.

"Go to my friends!" he echoed. "How easy it is to give advice!—and what a blood-sucker Brown is! He knew I was dead-broke, and on the verge of ruin, yet he did not even offer to return what he won by almost forcing me into the last bet on High Boots. What a world of vultures this is!"

The miserable victim of his own reckless ways stood and meditated in half-drunken bitterness on his hard luck ignoring the fact that his knowledge of such men had come after he persistently sought their company against the advice, and in defiance of the pleadings of those who had his welfare at heart.

A casual acquaintance among the other bettors, who had lost but lightly on the seven furlongs, approached and made some bantering remark, but Tildrake turned from him abruptly and went out.

He had seen enough of Mullgraff's for that day.

In the meanwhile Asa High had gone back to his duties, and pressure of work crowded thoughts of Tildrake out of his mind for the time.

Asa rejoiced in having a good home, and parents to whom he properly gave respect, for they deserved it. In return he received their fullest approval and confidence. He had always lived at home until a fortnight before the events previously described, when, his mother's health not being of the best, all of the family but Asa had gone to the country. That he did not accompany them was due to the fact that he needed to keep his position, the family being poor, and the latter circumstance had sent the messenger-boy for the time being to a boarding-house more conspicuous for low prices than grandeur.

In fact, it was one of the blumiest of boarding-houses, and its patrons were people who were nearly all in hard luck, or liable to be.

As far as Ace High had observed none of them were otherwise than law-abiding, but he would not have trusted the motley collection very confidently.

He was on his way toward his temporary haven, and had nearly reached it on this occasion, when he was surprised to encounter young Tildrake again. What the latter was doing in that locality he could not imagine, but he was pleased to see that he was not so much under the influence of drink as before.

He approached at once.

"Hallo, Harry!" he exclaimed, in a friendly way.

Tildrake started nervously, and then looked relieved when he saw the messenger.

"Oh! it's you, is it?"

"Yes. What are you doing here?"

"Traveling."

"Where to?"

"Ruin, I presume; I don't know."

"Have you been home?"

"No, and I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"It ain't any place for me—at least, I am not any person for the place."

"Do you really mean that you're not going home?"

"I don't know."

Tildrake's gloomy, peculiar manner impressed Ace High strongly, and he laid his hand on the former's arm.

"Now, see here, Harry; this won't do. You are in a bad way, and your only hope is to go home. That's the place for you. You're not fit to take care of yourself, and you want your father's advice."

It was curious counsel for a fifteen-year-old boy to give to one three years his senior, but Messenger 999 was a peculiar boy. Hard knocks had made him wise before his time, and he knew far more than Headstrong Harry.

The latter hesitated for a moment, and then slowly replied:

"Ace, do you know of a place I can sleep, to-night?"

"Do I? Why, yes; if you're bent on not going home, though I would advise—"

"Yes, yes, I know; but I'm not going home."

Tildrake passed his hand nervously across his face, and his uncertain manner showed that he did not have the same idea of what he was going to do for two successive minutes. After surveying him curiously, Asa ventured to add:

"You know your father don't like to have you out of nights, and you've got to go home some time."

"There may be a change before another night falls," answered Harry, impressively. "Yes; I am sure there will be a change. By that time I may be so fixed that I shall know just what to do, and how to do it."

His expression and voice alarmed his little friend.

"Are you in trouble?"

"Ain't I always in trouble?"

"I mean, anything serious?"

"Yes, I am."

"What is it?"

"I'm not giving my secrets away, at present. By to-morrow night you may know as well as I do, and then you won't need to ask questions."

"Harry, I hope you haven't gone in so deep you can't get out."

"Oh! I can 'get out!' Never fear as to that."

The speaker's reckless, bitter manner continued, and Ace High was more than ever troubled, but he did not succeed in getting any definite explanation. Harry evaded the questions, and the messenger was obliged to be as content as possible, but his mind was not at ease.

He knew that Harry Tildrake was a thoroughly "wild" young man. His early training, a mixture of careless indifference and disgraceful weakness in the way of toleration, had left him wholly unfit for the battle of life. He had grown up willful and headstrong, and so had taken to dissipation and evil ways as naturally as a duck to water.

What had he done now? Asa could not surmise. It was nothing for Harry to be penniless and in debt—that was his natural condition. There was something—something worse—and the trouble was not apparent on the surface.

Tildrake did not refuse the invitation to go with Ace to the boarding-house; on the contrary, he seemed to like the idea, and went along without much delay.

The effects of the liquor were passing away, and the misguided young man would have at-

tracted no particular attention if he had not marched along like one in a dream. His troubles hung upon and haunted him, and his mind was so busy that Ace found him a dull companion.

They soon reached the boarding-house.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE NIGHT OCCURRENCE.

HARRY TILDRAKE refused to eat supper, but did not object to entering the boarding-house parlor. He sat down by the window and looked out thoughtfully, no one being near to molest him.

"It's got to come!" he muttered, darkly. "I suppose it will hurt my father with the world, but his feelings can't be harrowed up much worse than they have been. If ever there was a black sheep, I've been one. I've gone a head-long road, and I'm at the end. I hope nobody will be so foolish as to put up any money for me after I'm arrested. I've a good mind to go out and give myself up now, but I want to write a few letters while I'm free. Time enough for prison life later."

He smiled bitterly and tossed the dark hair back from his flushed forehead. He was not an ill-looking person, this son of the policeman, but he was one who had gone wholly wrong.

At times the idea of fleeing from the city entered his mind, but one needs money to travel, openly or secretly, and he was penniless.

After a while Asa High returned to the parlor, accompanied by three men. One of the latter was a bluff, red-faced man, whose clothes did not fit him any too well and whose hands were browned and hardened by labor in the outer air.

"Introduce me ter yer friend, Ace!" he requested, in his open, sociable way.

"Mr. Tildrake, this is Mr. Hicks—"

"Nat Hicks, yer Honor, right from the pine woods o' Mishegan," amended the red-faced man. "Glad ter meet yer, young comrade. I ain't nospruce New Yorker, but I've got a heart under my weskit as big as a bar'l—I hev, by Cain!"

He smote the "weskit" with his big hand, as if to emphasize his assertion, and beamed cordially upon the policeman's son.

"Interesting anatomical fact!" returned Harry, not without sarcasm.

"Jes' so! Yes, b'mighty! Right from the pine woods. See them hands? They've hewed down a right smart gang o' pine trees in their time, you bet!"

"Did it hurt the trees?"

"Hal! hal! They groaned when they went down, so I dare say it did. Good joke, that o' yours."

Mr. Nat Hicks punched Tildrake in the ribs, and actually found much amusement in what had been intended for a flippant retort. He was too simple-hearted, in his way, to suspect that a gentlemanly-looking young fellow whom he had never injured would intentionally sneer at him.

"First time I've been in New York in nigh twenty years," he went on. "Been backin' away at the pines ever sence. I've seen a bit o' wild life, you bet! Not all angels up in the pinneries, they ain't, you bet! Great crowd for shootin'. Bless you, yes! Don't you go thar, young feller. The work is downright laborious, an' you see nobody but other choppers. Gets demoralizin' after a bit. I've come out half-bear an' half-elefant—I hev, by Cain!"

"Why didn't you stay there?" peevishly asked Harry.

"I'm done; got through. Goin' back ter the old land of England, I be. Wouldn't never take me fur a British-born Jack, would ye? Wal, wal, over twenty year in this glorious land has made me all American. I ain't the same slender lad who crossed the ocean over two decades ago."

Hicks sighed and his jolly face sobered, but as no one spoke, he suddenly rallied, put his hand in his pocket, and drew out a big roll of green-backed bank notes.

"That is why I didn't stay in the pine woods!" he added, gleefully. "Run yer eye over that, young feller! See the green daubs sprawled over the paper, an' the magic figgers in the corners. Them's mine, an' I got 'em all by drivin' my ax inter the pines. Yes, by gracious! Why shouldn't I go home ter see the roof I's born under, when I've got that roll in my pocket?"

He flourished the money, but one of the men who had come up-stairs with him sharply observed:

"Better put your cash up, Hicks."

"Eh?"

"Keep your money out of sight, or you'll find it missing, yet."

"Say, d'ye know a man able ter take it away from Old Nat?"

"Many a boy, or girl, of ten could do the trick."

"Say, you're jokin' the old man."

"No joke at all. The man who flourishes money in public, in New York, generally gets relieved of it. Sharpers could spirit it away without your getting on to the trick. Keep your money out of sight, or you'll get robbed."

"Comrade, I ain't above takin' advice, an' in goes my cash; it goes, an' won't be seen ag'in. In the pine woods I've noticed that the green-horn who won't take advice generally comes ter grief. They're green thar; I s'pose mebbe I'm green here. Thankin' you, I obey; but, b' gracious, it sort o' hurts my pride ter hev yer intimate that Old Nat ain't able ter keep his money. You bet he means ter keer for it, fur five thousand dollars ain't rollin' round on every hoop. Nary!"

The pine-woodsman jammed his pocket together as if he would shut the bank-notes up beyond danger, and beamed upon his companions anew.

No unprejudiced person could help liking him. If he was unsophisticated he was ready to accept advice, and that good trait covered a multitude of sins, if he had any sins.

"My cash is all in Uncle Sam's paper, as you see," he went on, "but I may change it to the queen's equivalent. Ain't jestly decided whether ter put this land fur good or not; can't tell on'til I see the old home in Kent."

He sighed again, and it became evident that, in spite of his naturally high spirits, he had some trouble upon his mind.

"Better stick to America."

"I may travel. When I first come over the big water, I had a sartain objick in view. I spent a year, tryin' ter get at it, but it was a failure—a dead frost! Of late the old feelin' has come over me, an' I can't help feelin' that ef I travel round in these parts, from Boston to 'Frisco, I may make a diskivery an' set my thoughts at rest."

No one asked what was preying upon the woodsman's spirits. Those who had known him during the five days he had been in the house had heard him talk in a like manner before, but, communicative as he was on other subjects, he had never seen fit to tell what his secret was, and they, true to the policy of New Yorkers, had never tried to force or angle for confidence.

Conversation became more general, but bluff Mr. Hicks continually did more than his share, for his good-nature bubbled unceasingly.

Ace High and Harry Tildrake had but little to say. The latter sat back in the shadow and seemed to be in deep thought, and the messenger watched him anxiously.

The boy felt certain that a crisis was at hand in Headstrong Harry's life. What it was he did not know, but, naturally, with so much evidence to that effect, he surmised that the headlong course of the policeman's son had placed him in a dangerous position.

Asa wished that the elder Tildrake was there, but it was a fact that he had not been able to control his son, and, having promised to say nothing, Asa had no idea of breaking his word.

Harry, judging by appearances, would have sat there like a statue all the evening, but his young friend got him out for a walk, which he took in the same abstracted manner; and Ace was both perplexed and worried.

Later, they returned to the house and retired for the night.

Ace's bed was big and broad, and there was ample room for Harry under the covers. The latter did not grow more sociable after they lay down, so the young host had only his thoughts for company while he remained awake.

This was not a great while. He was weary, and sleep soon overcame him.

He slept and dreamed. He dreamed that Old Nat Hicks offered to give all his money jointly to the dreamer and Tildrake, for them to start in business; that this was done, and, making the venture, they were remarkably successful; that years passed, and they had grown very wealthy, when, finally, Tildrake stole every dollar belonging to the firm and ran away, leaving Ace penniless.

At this point the dreamer awoke, and was somewhat relieved to find that he had not been ruined in business, but, as he smiled at the idea, he was impressed by the silence which existed around him.

He put forth one hand—Harry was not there; the bed was empty.

Considerably surprised, Ace sat up and called his companion's name. There was no answer.

Then he sprung out of bed and made haste to light the gas. He was alone in the room; there was no sign of Tildrake.

"He's skipped!" Ace exclaimed.

This seemed to be the fact. Harry was gone, and his clothes had gone with him; nothing belonging to him remained.

The clock on the mantel indicated two o'clock, but it did not reveal how long the missing youth had been gone. Asa was both surprised and worried. He could not imagine why his companion had gone so unceremoniously. Then, too, where had he gone? He had declared that he would not go home, and he had no money to pay for lodgings.

"Poor Harry! I'm afraid he is in a very bad way. I'm not sure he was just in his right mind, and I don't know but I ought to have sent word to his father at once. What am I to do now? I don't know where to look for him, or I would go out and hunt."

Too anxious to retire again at once, the messenger opened the door and looked out. The hall was dark, but a faint sign of light was visible on the floor below.

Thinking that Harry might have gone there, he went to the head of the stairs and looked down. Some one, fully dressed, was moving in the lower hall, and carrying a kerosene lamp. The wick, however, was turned low, and the person's hand intentionally shielded what little light was given, so that it was impossible to say who it was.

"Harry!" Ace called, as an experiment.

The unknown stopped short.

"Is that you, Harry?"

The person promptly blew out the light.

Ace was perplexed. Whoever it was he could see no reason for such caution, and he decided to investigate at once.

Quickly returning to his own room he secured some matches and, returning, lighted the gas in the upper hall. Then he descended to the next floor and lighted it there. The unknown had disappeared; no one was visible.

Ace went patiently on to the lower floor and tried the same experiment there. That hall was vacant, and the front door was locked. A more quiet and peaceable-looking house it would have been hard to find.

The investigator gave it up.

Of course, he reasoned, Harry Tildrake would not be prowling around in such a way in a strange house at two o'clock in the morning. No doubt, his late companion had gone away and locked the door after him—the key was not in the lock, inside or out—while the person with the lamp probably had a right to be moving there. As no lamps had ever been seen by him in the upper part of the building, it was likely that it had been brought up from the basement.

This theory was weak in one respect—as far as he knew no man in the house had access to the basement, and it was a man that he saw in the hall.

He returned to his own room.

"I'd give a dollar to know where Harry is!" he murmured, gloomily. "I've heard of folks as young as he making way with themselves, and he certainly had a good deal upon his mind. He talked strangely about to-morrow. What does it all mean?"

The question remained unanswered, when, after waiting for nearly an hour in vain, he again went to bed.

It was day when he awoke from the sleep which followed, but he was still alone; Tildrake had not returned. Ace rose in a dissatisfied frame of mind, dressed and went down to breakfast. No one asked after Harry, and the messenger was just flattering himself that he was to get away without anything unpleasant when Old Nat Hicks abruptly entered the room.

The pine-woodsman's face bore a peculiar, anxious look, and he at once broke with the question:

"Gents, hev any o' you been in my room?"

Surprise caused a brief delay, and then several persons spoke to announce that they had not.

"B'gracious! somebody has!"

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Hicks?" asked the landlady.

"Wrong! Well, I should say so. I've been robbed!"

"Of what?"

"Every dollar o' my money!"

The big woodsman brought his hands together forcibly, and glared around as if eager to find

the robber and make him feel the weight of those hands.

"A thief came inter my room last night," he added, "took my money an' skipped out with him. I'm dead cleaned out, b' Cain!"

Ace High felt a strange chill stealing over him. He thought of Harry Tildrake and his desperate mood of the previous night. A painful fear oppressed him. Where had Harry been when the robbery was committed?

CHAPTER IV.

A REMARKABLE CASE OF BURGLARY.

MARKER, GANN & LEIGH were merchants doing a slow, sure, old-fashioned business on Broadway, several blocks below Houston street.

On the morning following the events previously described, Mr. Leigh, the junior member of the firm, who was a convivial young bachelor, was in a saloon on an adjacent cross-street when Peter Reidy, the porter of his house, rushed in out of breath.

"Mr. Leigh!" he cried, "burglars have been in the store!"

"Have they? They don't seem to have stolen you."

"But the safe is forced open."

"And empty?"

"I didn't look to see."

"There was only three hundred dollars inside, and I guess we can stand that loss, but I'll go over and see about it, at once."

Mr. Leigh was very cool, partly because it was his nature to be, and partly because he knew that burglars could not ruin the firm. They did a commission business; what goods they had in stock were not numerous, or so very valuable; and, as he had said, only three hundred dollars had been left in the safe the previous day.

He and Reidy walked toward the store.

"Have you notified the police, Peter?" Leigh asked.

"Not yet, sir."

"Whom did you leave in charge?"

"Great Scott!"

"I was not aware we had such an employee."

"Why, I forgot to have any one left in charge, and no one was there when I left. I'm very sorry, sir, but I saw you go into that place, and just run to tell you, without delay."

"Probably no one has carried off the safe," was the philosophical reply.

They reached the Broadway building, ascended the stairs and entered their own quarters. There was no sign of burglarious strangers. On the contrary, one of the clerks had arrived and was calmly exchanging his street-coat for one worn in the office.

This clerk was named Harry Tildrake.

Mr. Leigh gave the young man only casual attention, but walked to the private office. Sure enough, the safe-door was ajar, and bore evidence of having been tampered with. It was no modern wonder, proof against almost everything human; but a very old-fashioned safe, with which Mr. Marker, the senior partner, had commenced business many years before.

Plainly, the lock had been picked just as an expert burglar could pick the lock of any old-time safe.

Leigh ran his hand inside to where the money had been—and found it still there. He took out the package and counted the various bills. Then he turned a puzzled face toward the porter.

"Not a dollar gone!" he declared.

Reidy drew a breath of deep relief.

"Thank fortune for that!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, but see here: This money was right where no one could overlook it, and where any one could take it when once the safe was open. Why didn't the burglar take it?"

"Really, I don't know, sir."

"Nor I. It was the only valuable thing in the safe, and it was left. Did you move those papers, inside?"

"No, sir."

"Then the burglar did. He found them utterly worthless to him, and left them. Why did he leave the money, which was in bills valuable to all, from pauper to millionaire?"

"I can't imagine."

"Nor I."

Mr. Leigh was thoroughly puzzled, and, after a little hesitation, he added:

"Call Tildrake!"

Reidy obeyed, and young Mr. Tildrake came in promptly and quietly.

"Harry," said his employer, "do you remember when you gave me this roll of bills yesterday?"

"Yes, sir," was the steady reply.

"Did I ask you the amount?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you said—what?"
 "Three hundred dollars, sir."
 "How did you know?"
 Tildrake looked surprised.
 "Why, sir, because I counted it, as usual."
 "Did you take the number of any of the bills?"

The clerk's gaze fell and he looked startled, but Leigh was not looking at him, and did not notice the fact.

"I did not, sir. I was not aware that you wished it done."

"I did not, and did not expect you had done such a thing; but I wanted to make sure. There is a mystery here."

"Is anything wrong?" the clerk asked, in a low voice.

"Do you see the marks on the safe, there?"

"Yes, sir."

"We have had a burglar here. He came, forced open the safe, had all at his mercy, and took—nothing! The mystery is, why did he leave three hundred dollars of good money when he had it dead to rights?"

A very peculiar expression went over the clerk's face—came and disappeared like a flash of light. It was not observed by either Leigh or Reidy. If it had been they would not have understood it, though it inevitably would have suggested that he had a sudden, important idea.

Leigh replaced the money and closed the safe.

"We will look for further traces of our burglar," he added. "Let us see how he first entered the building."

The speaker descended to the street-door, and found indications there that the outside lock had been picked and then refastened—for so Reidy had found it.

Clearly, an expert house-breaker had made his way in by the shortest, simplest way. All this was perfectly plain, but the great riddle in the case remained unsolved—why had he not taken the money?

"Shall I notify the police, sir?" asked Reidy.

"No. We will wait until Mr. Marker comes. In the mean while, say nothing about this affair to the other clerks. Let the secret rest with us three—what we know of it—until our senior partner gets ready to act."

The employees promised, and each went about his duties. Harry Tildrake arranged his desk for work, but his movements were mechanical and his eyes had a faraway look.

"For once I have done good while engaged in mischief!" he muttered, half-audibly, as he opened a book and dipped his pen in ink for work.

The other clerks came in rapidly, but it was two hours later when Mr. Marker, the venerable head of the house, came laboring up the stairs, making his cane bend under his weight. The story of the mystery was at once told him in the private office, only the partners being present.

"Perhaps you can explain why our burglar left the money?" suggested Leigh.

Many questions were asked and answered, but all of Marker's wide experience failed to give him a clue. He did not pretend to have one.

"We never have been in the habit of having anything in the safe except a little ready money," he observed. "Those who know much about us are aware of this fact, while those who know but little have no reason to suspect that we kept other valuables. We can only infer that the thief came to see what plunder he could find, yet he deliberately left the most desirable of all plunder—cash! Can he have been frightened away?"

"It is not likely," returned Gane. "He took time to relock the outside door."

"True."

"I suppose I need not ask," put in Leigh, "if you regard Reidy as above suspicion?"

Marker smiled.

"Reidy has been with me for thirty years, and I would stake my life on his strictest honor. He says that he found the outside door locked and the safe open—result, we are to believe every word he has said."

The junior partners did not answer, and, after a pause, Marker resumed:

"There is something very odd about this matter; something we may guess upon as long as we will, and never get nearer the mark. It is work for a detective. True, we have lost nothing, but the fact that we have been at the mercy of an unknown makes it imperative that we protect ourselves in future. Mr. Gane, were you and Reidy the last to leave here, last night, as usual?"

"Yes."

"And you, Mr. Leigh—there was no one in here this morning until you came with Reidy?"

"Only young Tildrake, sir."

"I had overlooked him. I think you said he arrived while Reidy was out to call you?"

"Yes."

"He did not see anything out of the way?"

"No. Why should he?"

"There is a possibility, of course—absurd as it seems—that the burglar was still here when Reidy arrived, and that he seized the first chance, when Reidy went out, to run away. This is not likely, however, and he would hardly have left the money, even in the hour of danger. We will dismiss that possibility; it is not worth thought."

The senior partner allowed that he was wholly at loss, and the trio soon decided that they were wasting time by indulging in speculation. It was agreed that Mr. Gane should go to Police Headquarters and lay the matter before a competent detective, and he started at once.

As he went out of the private office, he was brought near to Harry Tildrake's desk. That young man was very busy over his books, and did not look up. The fact that he had been the first of the clerks at the office, that morning, trifling as it seemed, caused Mr. Gane to look at him more critically than he had ever done before.

"An intelligent-looking lad," he thought, "but I'm afraid he is sowing wild oats. He looks as if he had taken more strong drink last night than was good for him. However, boys will be boys, and Tildrake seems to be a capable and honest fellow."

CHAPTER V.

THE WAY OF A YOUNG "MAN ABOUT TOWN."

WHEN Harry Tildrake, clerk, went out to lunch, he met a young friend there whom he at once saluted pleasantly.

"I was in hopes I should run upon you, Tom," he said. "I am now able to pay you for your loan, both in thanks and money."

And he gave Tom a ten-dollar bank-note.

"You're in better luck than I, Til," observed Tom. "I'm broke, and all because I took your advice and backed High Boots. Guess you didn't have the tip, after all."

"I paid for it."

"Do you know, I have an idea these fellows who give tips don't know anything more how races are going to end than we do."

"You're right," Harry answered. "I've banked on their say-so, and usually to lose. I believe they are cut-throats. Hereafter I go on my own judgment."

"I think I shall quit the whole thing."

"Will you be driven out? That isn't my style. I'm going to get the races down fine, if it does hit me hard to learn how to play them."

"I thought you went heavy on High Boots?"

"I did."

"Yet you are flush."

"Oh! I had some side-lines out," Harry replied, evasively. "But see here, Tom: Don't mention that I paid you. I am a little in pocket, but some of the other fellows will be jumping on me for favoring you, if it gets abroad. As it is, all know I went heavy on High Boots, and they will expect me to be broke. Don't say a word about that sawbuck."

"Not I. I'm too glad to get it to give you away."

Tildrake had his lunch, and then, after looking at the time, made his way to a jewelry store. A clerk behind the counter nodded like one who sees a casual acquaintance.

"Fine day, sir."

"Huge! By the way, have you sold that diamond I was looking at last week?"

"No, here it is."

The speaker brought out a ring which, while of modest dimensions, was one to excite covetousness in almost any mind. The stone was a blue diamond, and it sent bright rays of light shooting out with every change of position.

Tildrake looked at it admiringly.

"I suppose there has been no fall in the price?"

"We couldn't possibly sell it for less than a hundred and twenty-five, sir."

"I'll take it, then. Put it up."

When the ring was ready Harry handed over the pay in three bills and left the store, the ring reposing in his pocket. A few yards away he met another young man.

"Hallo, Til! You are just the fellow I wanted to see. Old boy, I'm stranded! What can you do?"

"I owe you twenty," Harry glibly answered, "and I'd like awfully to pay you—you deserve it—but I am 'way down, myself. I played High Boots yesterday, and I'm dead-broke."

"Curse the races!" was the bitter exclamation. "Do you know, Til, every spare dollar

I've had in three years has gone into that soup-dish. Now I win on a race; more often I lose, and it has literally robbed me. I've eaten a ten-cent lunch a hundred times when I need a twenty-five, just to bet on the races. I wish the Old Nick had them—he owns them, anyhow!"

"Brace up! You'll win, later."

"A dying man always breathes one gasp just before he goes off. Well, I'm sorry you can't pay me that double-X."

"I can't, now, but I'll do my best to get it. I'm sorry you're down, old fellow, and I'll give you a lift if I can."

They separated, and Harry walked toward the store.

"He shall have it," the clerk thought. "I did intend to go my whole pile on Trip-hammer for the handicap, but I've no right to swindle an honest man."

That evening, just after business hours, the debtor was paid in full by Tildrake, and the latter did not have to borrow, himself, to meet the obligation.

Nothing more was said at Marker, Gane & Leigh's, outside the private office, about the mysterious burglar, and neither Tildrake nor Reidy knew what the firm was going to do about the case. The porter told Harry privately, however, that he was pretty sure that Mr. Gane had notified the police, and they probably would have an explanation of the affair sooner or later.

After this Harry had a period of meditation, and for some time his pen was held idly in his hand. Perhaps he was wondering what the police would discover.

The clerk lost no time in going home after he had left the office for the day, and repaid the borrowed money. He did not go with a very light heart, for he was pretty confident that trouble would occur when he arrived. The occupation of his policeman father, and his own wayward ways, did not agree any better than their views, and all was not pleasant there when they met.

Harry's mother had died when he was five years old, and he had been sent to live with his grandparents. This proved to be an error. The boy's nature was naturally perverse and rebellious, and he had gone where neither would be checked.

His grandfather was indifferent; his grandmother was weak and indulgent. As a result, the boy had grown up untamed, wild, imperious, and, worst of all, without a proper sense of what was due himself and others.

At the age of fifteen he returned to New York, and to his father's roof. Palmer Tildrake had married again, but he would have had all of a father's pride in Harry if he had been given a chance; but the youth, always headstrong, now had fresh temptations and opportunities for evil-doing within his reach, and there was music of a disagreeable kind in the Tildrake house in the years that followed.

Now, when Harry was eighteen, the neighbors said of him that he was "going to the dogs" at a rapid pace, though no one had ever suspected him of crime.

In this respect the neighbors were more lenient than the father. Knowing something of his son's companions, and suspecting more, he lived in constant dread of a calamity.

On this evening when Harry entered the house he found his father alone in the front room. The policeman gave him a kind greeting, and the son, knowing that an explanation must come, plunged into it at once.

"I didn't get home, last night."

"No."

"I stayed with one of the fellows."

"Caverley?"

"No; a friend of mine on Houston street."

Nobody you know."

"I would like to see him."

"Why?"

"To see if he was a worthy companion."

"There you go, again!" cried Harry, angrily.

"You think all my associates are knaves. Fact is, you've been watching rascals so long, in your business, that you have a mental case of strabismus."

"I hope you were not playing the races, or drinking," quietly continued the policeman.

"Neither one; I had a hand in a quiet whist-party, and went to bed at eleven, sober and dry," Harry answered, trying to be jocular.

"Did you go there right from the office?"

For a moment Harry hesitated, but he decided to take the risk of bold falsehood.

"Yes."

The policeman sighed.

"I regret to find that, as usual, you are trying to cover up unworthy conduct with an un-

true statement. Yesterday afternoon you were in Mulgraff's pool-rooms, drinking heavily and betting on the races!"

The son's face fell.

"Who says so?"

"A detective, who saw you there."

"Was he betting, too?"

"He was there in the line of his duty, only; but his case is not the one under consideration. To get to Mulgraff's as early as you were there you must have got excused at the office. To do this, you probably gave some false excuse. In any case, you went among evil associates. The man, Brown, whom you were with, is a professional gambler, and probably worse. He is likely to land in prison one of these days, and his associates may go with him."

"Meaning me?"

"I hope it don't mean you."

"You have the same as charged me with crime!" cried Harry, hotly.

"No," was the patient answer; "I have only warned you."

"You warn me every night. Hang it! ain't I old enough to take care of myself?"

"If you are, you will shake your present associates before they get you into trouble."

"Now, see here: I don't want to quarrel, but I'm tired of this sort of talk. Nobody outside this house ever accused me of being underwitted—"

"Has any one within the house?"

"Practically, yes. You think I can't make a choice of associates without getting done up every time. I'm eighteen years old, and when is a fellow to have discretion, if not at that age? I go with those I know to be all right, and with nobody else. You don't know them; I do. I say they're square."

"How about over indulgence in liquor on their part and yours?"

"Oh! is that coming up, too?"

"You object to it?"

"I do."

"And to my warning you against Mulgraff's, and against Herman Brown?"

"Yes. I don't want a long lecture—"

"You shall not have one, my son; I am going to say no more. These talks of ours have been going on for years; as you insinuate, it is time to stop them. I have counseled and advised—you know my views. Here I will end, since you demand it, but end with the statement that Herman Brown is a man whose picture is in the Rogues' Gallery; who is a professional gambler; who is being watched by the detectives, and who will be landed in the Tombs before many years. It will be his last taste of freedom for years to come. I hope he will not drag any one to ruin with him. That is all, my son."

Mr. Tildrake had retained the kindness which had marked his manner from the beginning, and emotion had caused his voice to tremble perceptibly.

If Harry had but known it, he had his best friend before him, but he could not understand that a man who had worn a policeman's uniform until he had grown gray with years was a fit adviser for a young blood who wanted to enjoy life.

"Well, if you're ready to call the dogs off, I'm glad," he answered, with a sigh of relief. "I hope it will last."

Afraid that it would not last, he arose to leave the room. Palmer Tildrake did not seek to stop him. The boy was ignoring all warnings, even then, and probably giving little thought to Brown's case, but the policeman had no more to say.

When Harry reached the hall the front door was open, and the Tildrakes' single servant was sweeping the dust from the steps. Harry looked that way casually, and was somewhat surprised to see Asa High.

The messenger-boy ran up the steps and entered the house.

"I want to see you!" he exclaimed.

There was a troubled, almost frightened look on his face which ought to have suggested something to Harry, but, just then, the latter was all occupied with his late victory.

"Come to my room," he answered, carelessly.

CHAPTER VI.

HEADSTRONG HARRY IS ALARMED.

REACHING Harry's sleeping-room, the latter directed Asa to sit down, and then, himself, lighted a cigar, took a chair, crossed his legs and assumed a contented air so different from his mood of the previous night that the High Card gazed at him in silent wonder.

"I suppose I ought to apologize for leaving you so abruptly, Ace," Harry observed.

"Why did you do it?" Asa quickly asked.

"I was nervous, and couldn't sleep."

"Where did you go?"

"To a hotel."

"But I thought you were broke."

"Oh! I had a few dollars."

"How did you get out of my boarding-house?"

"How do you suppose? By the door."

"But it was locked."

"It wasn't much work to unlock it, when the key was right there."

"Did you leave it unlocked, when you'd got out?"

"You seem mighty inquisitive, but I don't mind saying that I relocked the door, shoved the key under it, and left it there."

"The key was not on the floor, this morning."

"What's that to me? Are the folks kicking up a row over a lost brass key? If so, I'm able to buy them a new one!"

"Harry, do you know what happened at the house last night?"

Knowing Ace as he did young Tildrake had been stupid not to see by his manner before then that something serious was afloat, but, while he had managed to follow the conversation close enough to do his share of the talking, he had been so occupied with the significance of his father's assertion that he would interfere with him no more that he had not been attentive to anything else.

The last question, and the peculiar way in which it was asked, caused him to start and look sharply at the messenger.

"What did happen?" he asked.

"Old Nat Hicks was robbed of all his money!"

"Robbed?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"That's the question. It must have been some one who slept in the house last night, for no one broke in!"

There was fear and anxiety in Ace's mind, and he was watching Tildrake closely. He saw that young man grow pale until he was almost colorless, while his expression became one of fright.

"How do you know?" he gasped.

"Why, Hicks says so."

"Do they know who did it?"

"No."

"Do they suspect anybody?"

"They want to know," Ace steadily announced, "who the young man was who stayed with me last night, when he went away, and where he is now!"

"They want to find me?" cried Harry, in alarm.

"Yes."

"But I didn't take the money."

"Can you prove that?" eagerly asked Ace.

"Prove it! It's for them to prove that I did, if they charge it. They can't prove it."

Tildrake spoke with a good deal of excitement, and forgot to puff his cigar.

"Why didn't the old man take care of his money?" he added, sharply. "He went around boasting about it; he deserved to lose it, I say."

"Harry, Mr. Hicks is a man getting along in years; that money was his savings of a lifetime, and now he is penniless just as he wants to go to his old home once more."

"He may get it back."

Mechanically the clerk's hand strayed to his pocket. In it there was a small paper box, and in the box was a diamond ring.

"Do you think it could—could have been taken by—by mistake?" asked Ace, hesitatingly.

"I don't know."

"Did you see any one about the house when you came out, last night?"

"No."

"They want to see you, and ask you—"

"See me!" cried Harry. "Well, I guess I am not going to turn detective to oblige them. I shall not go near them."

"Then they will come to you."

"Did you tell them where I was?—where I live?"

"No. I managed to dodge that point, but if I go back there again, they will go for me—"

"Don't you go back!" Tildrake exclaimed, eagerly. "You keep away, and they won't find either of us. It will be easy to dodge them."

"Harry, what objection have you to going right to them, and talking it all over plainly?" bluntly asked Ace.

"And let them accuse me of stealing the money?"

"They will accuse you just the same if you stay away, and, what is more, your absence will

go all against you. They don't know that you skipped out at two o'clock at night, but I think they suspect it. Now, you go there and let them see you ain't afraid."

"I reckon I'm not obliged to help that old wood-chopper find money that he simply threw away by his bull-headed carelessness. I sha'n't go a step!"

There was stubborn determination in this assertion, but, otherwise Harry's manner was evasive and disingenuous. This Ace plainly saw, and it gave him a shock.

From the first he had understood that if he told the officers how Tildrake had left the house at dead of night it would go strong against the latter, and he had guarded off the statement until he could see Harry. Grave doubts were in the messenger's mind, but he had tried to force them down. Now, Harry, himself, was doing more to create a well-defined suspicion than circumstantial evidence could do in any case.

"I won't go near them!" repeated the policeman's son, after a pause, and quite as resolutely as before.

"They will find you."

"I won't go around town until it blows over."

"Blows over! Harry, are you guilty?"

"Am I? You talk nonsense; of course I'm not. Do you take me for a thief?"

"That's a matter between you and them, but it seems to me your best way is to go right to the police, or to Hicks's, possibly; and let them see that you are what you claim to be—an innocent man."

"They might not believe me, and I don't want to be locked up. I shall not go!"

There was more than stubborn purpose in Tildrake's manner. The peltor had not deserted his face wholly, nor had the air of alarm disappeared. Ace simply knew that Harry was frightened and worried, and he could find only one explanation of the fact.

"Do you consider how it will place me?" the messenger asked. "I got away easy, this morning, but I shall be plied with questions when I show up to-night—"

"You mustn't go!"

"What shall I do, then? You may be able to hide, but I can't. They know I am in the telegraph service, and they can find me easily—"

"Get leave of absence for a few days."

"And draw suspicion upon myself? What would they think if I should disappear all of a sudden, just after the theft? I warded off the explanation until I could see you, but, even if we are neighbors, I can't sacrifice myself for you."

"I should think you might do a little."

"Would you have me brand myself a thief?"

Ace made the retort with considerable warmth. Harry's selfishness was so complete and so great that the messenger's patience began to vanish entirely.

As for Tildrake, he had not before realized how easy it was for his companion to become enmeshed in the lines of the web, but it now became clear that he must consider both sides of the question.

His selfishness did not disappear, but he was not quite foolish enough to expect Asa deliberately to sacrifice himself to please the high-flying clerk.

The latter considered the point, and then suddenly said:

"We need an older head on this than ours. Come with me, and I'll have a friend of mine tackle it."

Ace suggested that Palmer Tildrake be called into the council and all be left to him; but Harry opposed the plan vehemently. Reluctantly enough Ace yielded; they left the house and went to another several blocks away.

When they reached it they found the door open, and a very corpulent man of middle age sitting in a chair close to the entrance trying to keep cool.

"Ah! Til, my boy, so it's you?" he greeted, cordially.

"Yes, Mr. Ward. Can we see you privately?"

"Of course, my son. This place is private, for no one can overhear us. Speak out!"

The location did not please Harry, but he yielded to his adviser—he had often before yielded to Bartholomew Ward, and to his sorrow—and began a statement of the affair at the boarding-house. While he talked Ace studied Ward.

The latter, in the High Card's estimation, was a most unprepossessing-looking creature. He was not tall, yet he had enough avoirdupois on his bones to make him a heavy weight to the extent of at least two hundred and fifty pounds.

He was fairly well-dressed, but the front of his coat was smeared and soiled, and his whole aspect was dirty, greasy and offensive. He had a dissipated look, and a cunning, unscrupulous face.

It was not to Harry's credit that he had such a "friend."

Mr. Ward, however, evidently had a head as long, metaphorically, as his body was deep.

"My son," he said, quietly, "you will go to the boarding-house, see this good Mr. Hicks, and assure him that you, being innocent, are ready to answer all questions."

"But the way I left the house—"

"You left at daybreak, because you had an engagement."

"I left at nearer two o'clock—"

"You left at six," declared Mr. Ward, with a wave of his fat hand.

Harry brightened up a good deal.

"But what if they do not believe me?"

"They must believe you. They have no evidence against you, or, if they have, it will not hold!"

As Mr. Ward pronounced these words the door was suddenly darkened and another man stood before them. Harry Tildrake looked up and grew pale as he recognized Old Nat Hicks.

"Hallo, young feller!" exclaimed the pine-woodsman. "You are jest the chap I want ter see!"

CHAPTER VII.

GIVING FALSE EVIDENCE.

THE man from Michigan spoke in a hearty, friendly voice which ought to have proved reassuring, but it was not so in Harry Tildrake's case.

That young man again became strangely pale, and he stared at Old Nat Hicks as if he saw the sword of ruin menacing him.

"Funny how I run on ter you," added Old Nat. "I was passin', an' I happened ter look this way, an' hyar ye was. Nat'ral consequence, hyar I be, too. Hope I don't intrude, pard?"

The last words were addressed apologetically to Mr. Bartholomew Ward, and that astute gentleman did not fail to suspect Nat's identity at the start.

The traveler bore the air, if not the odor, of the backwoods in his every physical and facial peculiarity.

"Make no apology, my dear sir," returned Ward, very blandly. "All of our Harry's friends are my friends, too. I did not catch your name."

"I'm Old Nat Hicks."

"Asa, run and get a nice chair for good Mr. Hicks, sonny!"

Of course this was directed to Ace High, but Hicks shook his head.

"Can't stop," he declared. "All I want is ter hev a bit o' talk with the young ters. The constables has been tryin' ter find 'em all day."

Headstrong Harry's hand trembled as it rested on his knee.

"Dear me! what for?" asked Mr. Ward.

"We want ter ask what they know erbout a robbery—"

"The unfortunate loss of your money?"

"Yes."

"Dear young Asa has been telling me about it. It is sad and infamous, sir—sad for you, and infamous that there are men in our loved city so evil as to take another's property. My dear sir, you have my deepest sympathy, and I only wish these boys could help you out. They were just going to call on you, and ask if they could help you."

Mr. Ward's utterance was rapid, oily, and, as it were, caressing, and he seemed in strong sympathy, as he had avowed, with the robbed man.

Hicks, however, looked doubtfully at Harry. "I'd kinder like ter know why this lad skipped out so queer an' said nothin'—"

"Our Harry was just coming to see you, and explain. Unfortunately, he can give you no clew. He had an engagement this morning which he had to keep, and which made it necessary for him to rise early. When he got up Asa was sleeping soundly, and he did not awaken him. Harry dressed and left the house. His engagement was for six-thirty, and it was just six when he left the house. He saw nothing out of the way, and no one loitering around, so you will perceive that he can't help you any."

Ace High was dismayed. He could see that it was Ward's purpose to tell the whole story himself, so that Tildrake could not make any error of judgment.

The story was told, and Ace knew it to be

false from beginning to end. It was not a pleasant feeling for the messenger to sit there and feel that he was being made party to a lie, and a lie told to cover—what?

If Harry was innocent, why was it necessary to lie, anyhow?

Leaving his own fears and suspicions out of consideration, the messenger knew that, from the first, Ward had taken it for granted that Harry was guilty, and was acting accordingly.

Hicks looked down-hearted.

"I was in hopes I could git some crew ter the mean skunks who stole my money," he observed.

"Probably the police will help you out."

"What ef the thief spends the money?"

"At least, he will be imprisoned."

"That won't pay my bill ter cross ther water. That thar money was the savin's o' years of toil—hard, muskular work with them brown hands hyar—an' I loved I would go an' see the old home. Now, I can't go!"

Nat Hicks was too big and strong to be unmanly, and too stout-hearted to repine weakly, but there was patnos and deep regret in his usually hearty voice that touched Ace.

The woodsman did not seem to think of doubting Ward or Tildrake for a moment. He accepted the bogus explanation quietly, and, after some further talk, went away in a dejected mood.

Ward slapped Harry upon the back.

"You are all right, my hearty!" he declared.

The policeman's son started and flushed.

"Do you think he believed it?"

"Believed it? Of course he did."

"I'm glad it's over."

"You must now go to the boarding-house, mix freely there, and, if you see an officer, talk right up to him like a little man."

"Impossible!"

"You must—and shall!"

The old man's voice had grown suddenly harsh and stern, and he showed that he meant all he said by insisting upon the point.

"Will you go with me?" Harry asked.

Bartholomew Ward smiled, chuckled, laughed aloud.

"I don't think so!" he answered, when his mirth had subsided. "You see, the police are a bit down on me because I once complained of a patrolman who was asleep on his post"—here the speaker winked at Harry and chuckled again—"and I don't think it would help you to be seen in my company."

Ace High thought the same. Ward was a deep, crafty man; Ace suspected that he was correspondingly wicked. The very presence of the fat man gave him the shivers, and he was resolved to have a plain talk with Tildrake at the first opportunity.

Ward succeeded in instilling some courage into Harry, and the two boys took a car and rode to the boarding-house. As chance would have it they there met the detective who had charge of the case, and the clerk faced him so boldly that the suspicions which had been aroused against him were, for the time being, dispelled.

The officer knew Palmer Tildrake, and knew, too, that he was one of the most honest men on the force. He had never heard of his brother-officer's son, and when Harry made known who he was, he at once stood well recommended by his father's good reputation.

"I'm glad you came," he remarked, "for, to be frank, I had entertained doubts of the unknown young man. Now, I'll look elsewhere."

Harry started to go away, and Asa followed him.

"I want to talk with you," the messenger explained.

"I got out of that slick," Tildrake exclaimed.

Ace made no reply, but managing to shape their course toward Washington Square, was ready to talk when they were seated.

"Harry, who is Bartholomew Ward?"

"Ward! Eh! he's a retired merchant, I believe."

"What kind of a man?"

"A heavy-weight!"

"You know what I mean."

"Ward is square as a brick."

"He sent you to tell a lie."

"See here, Ace, do you want me to get myself locked up, when I'm innocent?"

"If your innocent, what need was there of lying?"

"Oh! come now, don't be foolish. Of course I could not say I skipped out at two A. M., for it would lead to a lot of other questions, all useless."

"I can't imagine why you left at that hour."

"Didn't I tell you I was nervous, and went to a hotel, to be alone?"

"Yes; and you said, too, last night, that you were 'penniless.' Where did you get the money to pay your bill at the hotel?"

"You are a greeny, Ace. When a kid is dead-broke, it means he hasn't a cent in his pockets; with a business man, it's different. I had a few stray dollars, and I used them. What of it?"

"What hotel did you go to?"

Tildrake had been growing impatient and irritable, and his temper now gave way entirely.

"None of your business!" he retorted, angrily.

"I'd thank you to attend to your own affairs, boy! I'm not going to sit here and be badgered by you with questions that are ridiculous and impertinent. Maybe, you think I did take Old Hicks's money?"

"I think you know something about it!" Ace firmly answered.

Tildrake turned square upon his companion, and gave him a look full of anger and hostility. There was more in it, too—there was fear.

"You are crazy!" he uttered, nervously.

"And you are frightened!"

"Frightened?"

"Yes."

"What at?"

"You know best."

"Now, see here, Ace; I can bear a good deal from a neighbor, but you are going too strong. I'm no thief, and I won't be called one. See?"

"Understand me, too," urged Ace, patiently. "I have not accused you, and don't mean to—"

"You did the same."

"I said I thought you knew something about the robbery, and I think so still. If not, why did you grow pale when I told you about it, and when Hicks came upon us so suddenly? and why were you so anxious not to go to the boarding-house? Wait!—hear me out. You've been a wild boy, Harry, but I always hoped you'd keep out of crime; I hope so now. Whoever did that robbery, it was a most wicked thing. Nat Hicks is simple, kind and honest. He was basely robbed of all his savings. If I knew who did it, I should tell him."

"Even if 'twas me?"

"Yes."

"And be a tell-tale?"

"Better than party to crime."

Tildrake looked closely at the speaker for a few minutes, and then soberly answered:

"Ace, I'll take my oath that I did not steal the money and don't know who did, but if you advance the same ideas to others that you have to me, and set suspicion at work, you will ruin me and kill my father!"

He spoke nervously, brokenly, and Ace was freshly surprised.

"Why so, if you are innocent?" he asked.

"Because I am in a most terrible fix!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE BANK-NOTES.

ACE HIGH's feelings underwent a sudden change. He had always liked Harry, in spite of the latter's weaknesses, and, though they had never been intimate, it had been his opinion that the policeman's son was weak rather than wicked. The way Tildrake now spoke made an impression on Ace beyond the ordinary kind.

"What's your 'fix'?" the messenger asked.

"I can't tell you," Harry answered, "but I am in the closest corner of my life. If I get out, I'll never be in another like it. I repeat, I have not taken Nat Hicks's money, or been party to it, but the robbery may ruin me, all the same."

"Then you do know of it?"

"Ask me nothing; I can't tell!" groaned the clerk.

"You must tell one person—your father."

"No, no; of all persons, not him."

"But he may find a way out."

"There is no way out!"

"I don't understand—"

"Of course you don't, but to clear myself of this possible charge would only involve me deeper in disgrace. Turn whatever way I may, ruin is before me. Ace, you are three years younger than I; take warning by my situation. Shun evil company; that is what has brought me so low down, and into such deadly peril!"

Ace regarded his companion with considerable surprise. It was a new mood for him, but, plainly, one of his sincerity. Recklessness is not always hardihood; it was not so with Harry Tildrake. He had gone the pace bravely while he had a path comparatively clear, but now it had brought him into danger, it was a very different matter.

"Won't you tell me what the matter is?" Ace asked.

"I can't."

"But you ought to tell your father."

"I say no—a thousand times, no!"

"What good will you do by putting it off?"

"I won't tell, at all."

"Harry, you can depend upon one thing—the police are hold of this case, and they are going to sift it to the bottom. They will get at all the facts, and, when they do, no mercy will be shown those who are guilty. I advise you to speak out, and let your father and your other friends help you while they can. It can be fixed up now; later, it can't be, perhaps."

"We have talked enough on this subject, Ace. Of course I can't expect you to sacrifice yourself for me, and if you fear you will get into trouble you can tell the cops that I left the boarding-house, not in the early morning, but in the middle of the night. As for me, my lips are closed."

Tildrake rose suddenly, and made a movement to go.

"Harry, I hate to have you leave so."

"It can't be helped."

"Let me work for you."

"You?"

"Yes."

"What can you do?"

"Well, I don't know until I find out what's to be done, but I can hustle around and do my best."

"No use, Ace. I've got to go on the current, and let it carry me where it will. If it's into harbor, all well and good; if onto the breakers, good-by! That's all."

"One thing more. If you know where Hicks's money went to, it is your duty to help him get it back."

"I know nothing about his money!"

Tildrake's mood took another turn, and he spoke so irritably that Ace dropped the subject. He saw that the clerk was firm in his purpose, and he determined not to interfere with him any further.

They walked together in utter silence as long as their ways were one, and then Ace paused.

"I leave you here, Harry," he remarked.

"Yes. Good-night!"

Tildrake spoke mechanically, and kept on his way, apparently half-unconscious of what he was doing. His face was toward his father's house, and the messenger hoped he would go there at once.

As for Ace, he went to the boarding-house, and to his room. There he sat down to think over what had occurred.

He could not understand it at all, but one thing appeared to be certain—Headstrong Harry knew something about the taking of Nat Hicks's money. If he was not the thief—and Ace did not believe he was—he knew, or strongly suspected, who the guilty person was. Yes, more than that: he had admitted that he was enmeshed thereby, and this showed that he had knowledge of the crime, before or after its perpetration.

"I'm afraid he's in an awful fix, and it's no use to hope that the facts won't come out, I'm thinking. The police are sharp on the trail, and they will probably learn all about it. Harry is very foolish not to tell what he knows. I don't see why he don't tell, if he is innocent. And I'm sure he is innocent."

Ace tried to believe what he had last asserted, but it was a hard thing to do.

For years he had been accustomed to hear people prophesy evil of young Tildrake. Everybody knew he was wild, reckless, headstrong, and addicted to the keeping of bad company, and they had not been slow to say that he would go from indiscretion to crime.

Ace had never believed this. He thought he knew Harry to be honest, and had expected to see him turn over a new leaf as he grew older, and get in line with worthy people.

But, now, the clerk's present and future were darkly clouded, and the end could not be seen. Ace was not as confident as he had been.

He thought upon the matter for some time, but his fears for Tildrake did not prevent him from going to bed and enjoying a good sleep.

The following day, shortly after noon, a gentleman entered the telegraph-office, hurriedly wrote a message, sealed it in an envelope and directed:

"Let this be delivered as soon as possible. It is a matter concerning the police force, and of great importance."

"It shall be sent at once."

Ace High happened to be the only messenger in at that moment, and the message was given to him to deliver. He found the name on the

envelope no new one to him—it was that of Bellbar, the detective who had charge of Old Nat Hicks's case.

He took the message at once. It was directed to Bellbar's house, and he found the latter in. He had just finished lunch, and had a guest who looked as if he, too, might be a detective.

Bellbar recognized Ace at once, and pleasantly directed him to sit down until he saw if the message required an answer. He tore open the envelope and read the contents. Surprise, wonder and indecision at once became visible in his face, and, after studying the note for some time, he turned to his friend.

"Well, here is a mystery for you. You remember what I told you about my lost-money case?"

"Yes."

"Listen to these documents, and see what you make of them. Here is Number One, written by Clark & Tay, brokers, to Nathaniel Hicks, the man who was robbed."

Bellbar had drawn a letter from his pocket, and he now read aloud:

"DEAR SIR:—We have read in the afternoon papers of your misfortune, and tender our deep regrets. We hope you may be able to recover all you have lost, and think we may aid you at life. The newspaper says you have the number or none of your lost bank-notes. If you number among the lost those we recently gave you, we will say that we have the numbers. We gave you twenty-five twenties as change for a five hundred. This money we had just made up, with other bills, to send to Boston by Express. Hence, though we gave you a part, we still have all of the numbers. Herewith you will find a list of those you received, the number of each, and the bank which issued it. CLARK & TAY."

"One member of this firm," proceeded Bellbar, "was once in Michigan for his health. There he met Nat Hicks. When the latter came to New York, he called upon the firm, and, later, his money being wholly in large bills, went to them to get those of smaller denominations in place of a five-hundred. It is to this that the letter refers."

"I see."

"Clark & Tay sent this to Hicks last night, thinking it would be of value. It was, of course, for Hicks had spent but little of the money received, and I now had the numbers of over four hundred dollars' worth."

"You are in luck."

"Wait! There is more."

Bellbar glanced at Ace High. He had been speaking in a voice which he thought so low that the messenger could not overhear what he said, but he wanted to be sure of the fact.

Ace looked innocent and absent-minded, but he had sharp hearing, and not a word had escaped him.

"I called on Clark & Tay," continued Bellbar, "and the result has been that a singular fact has been reported to me direct. Listen, once more!"

Again he read aloud, and in these words:

"DEAR SIR:—We consider it our duty to inform you of a peculiar circumstance which has just come to light. Messrs. Marker, Gane & Leigh have been indebted to us to the amount of \$300. To-day the junior member of their firm called and paid the bill. While counting the cash given us I happened to notice the number of a twenty-dollar bank-note which went to make up the sum and recognized it as one we had given Nathaniel Hicks, and, presumably, one of those stolen from him. Investigation showed that there were seven bills of like denomination in the roll, all of which, we can testify, were among those we gave Hicks."

"Now, Mr. Bellbar, comes the strange part:

"Thinking I had made an important discovery I asked Mr. Leigh where and when they had received the money. His reply was peculiar. He stated that he did not know how that was, but when I insinuated that the date must be recent, he said that the whole \$300 had been in their safe since two o'clock P. M. Tuesday."

"When we stop to consider that Hicks was robbed after midnight, Tuesday, you will see the situation. How could the bills be stolen from Hicks if, even then, they were in Marker, Gane & Leigh's safe?"

"I leave you to solve this riddle, only adding that, when I told Mr. Leigh of the Hicks robbery, he said there was a mystery about the three-hundred-dollar roll, but that he could say nothing until he had taken counsel."

"We must leave you in the dark, but Mr. Leigh is a most estimable man. Something may be learned of him. CLARK & TAY."

Bellbar turned to his friend.

"What do you think of that?"

"A mistake."

"In what way?"

"Leigh is in error. The identical, same bank-notes can't have been in two places at the same time."

"Naturally, not."

"Nothing in it, Bell."

"Such seems to be the fact, but I'll call on Leigh."

The detective wrote a note of thanks to Clark & Tay, and sent it away by Ace High.

The messenger went in a troubled frame of mind. Having heard all that had been read and said, he could not take a dark view of the case. He gave scarcely a thought to the fact that Mr. Leigh declared the money had been locked up in the company's safe all the while; his whole attention was riveted upon the fact that Marker, Gane & Leigh, who had paid the money to Clark & Tay, were Harry Tildrake's employers.

"It looks darker and darker against Harry all the while," Ace thought, as he wended his way toward the telegraph-office. "He probably changed the stolen money for bills safer to pass."

Then a new idea occurred to the boy.

"What if this Leigh is not the honorable man he claims to be? What if he stole Hicks's money, and Harry is shielding him from a mistaken motive of friendship? By George! I am going to turn detective myself and look into this matter. It won't do any harm to shadow some of these men. I'll start out this very evening!"

CHAPTER IX.

NOT FOUND WHEN WANTED.

DETECTIVE BELLBAR found all the members of the firm of Marker, Gane & Leigh in when he called at their private office.

He explained who he was, and was cordially invited to sit down.

"We are glad you have come," observed Mr. Marker, "for we wished to see you—or, at least some representative of your case. Since Mr. Leigh was at Clark & Tay's we have seen a detective who, at present, is in our own employ, and he has given us leave to tell plainly what he had asked us before to keep secret."

"I shall be glad to hear you," Bellbar answered.

Marker then told plainly of the mysterious visit of the unknown burglar who had forced open their safe, rummaged the interior completely, and yet failed to take away the roll of bank-notes which Mr. Leigh found there, all safe, the next morning.

"We were owing Clark & Tay," explained Marker, "and, as Mr. Leigh intended to go at once to their place of business, he said he would take the money in cash and save the trouble of a check. He counted out three hundred dollars, and sent the rest of our cash to the bank, but was prevented from getting to Clark & Tay's that day. As a result, the three hundred dollars was left in the safe that night. The next day we held it out of curiosity, but to-day Mr. Leigh took it to Clark & Tay. That's the story in brief."

"Yet, according to Clark & Tay, there were in that package seven twenty-dollar bills which they had given Nathaniel Hicks, and which, according to him, remained in his possession up to midnight, Tuesday."

"Exactly."

"As bank-notes, unlike men, never have genuine doubles, it follows that, if they were locked in your safe, Hicks did not have them."

"Naturally."

"Has your detective decided why your burglar left the money in the safe?"

"No."

"Has he any theory?"

"He says he has not."

"Are Clark & Tay men liable to make mistakes?"

"That is what makes the matter so puzzling," Leigh interrupted. "They are wonderfully careful and systematic men, and if they say they gave that money to Hicks—and they do say so—I can't see how they can be in error. Yet, Hicks says that, of the total he received, not over thirty dollars had left his hands until he was robbed of all. How, then, could seven of his twenty-dollar bills be in our safe. Remember, they were locked up, here, at five P. M., Tuesday, and he was robbed eight or ten hours later."

"It can be explained in only two ways," replied the detective.

"What are they?"

"Either some one has made a mistake, or there is more to this burglar episode of yours than we know of. You say the only persons to arrive ahead of you were the porter and a clerk?"

"Yes," returned Leigh.

"Your porter came first and found the safe open. Is he a man given to romancing?"

"I'll swear to his honesty and veracity!" declared Mr. Marker.

"And the clerk?"

"We believe him to be all right, though he has not long service to speak for him, as Reidy, the porter, has."

"The clerk was here that morning, alone for awhile?"

"Yes. Reidy went to notify Mr. Lisle, and Tildrake came while Reidy was out."

"Who came?"

"Tildrake. That's the clerk's name—Harry Tildrake."

Bellbar was silent. It was a singular fact that the young man who had left Hicks's boarding-house so suddenly should be a clerk in the office where the other end of the money mystery was located.

"Did Tildrake do anything about the safe?" the detective finally asked, slowly.

"He did not discover that it was open until Reidy brought me in. None of the clerks are ever in this office, unless summoned here by us."

"Is Tildrake a steady-going young man?"

"We have no evidence to the contrary."

"Will you call him in here?"

"Certainly."

Mr. Leigh stepped into the main office, but soon returned with the tidings that Tildrake had been seized suddenly with an aching tooth, and gone out to get the pain relieved.

"I've left word that he is to come in when he returns," the merchant added.

"I'll wait for him. About the burglarious affair here, could it have been a bogus one?"

"Who should do it, and why? And what chance would the party have?"

"Really, I can't answer all these questions," admitted Bellbar, smiling.

"If you ever can, we will pay you well. Our detective admits that it's too much for him, thus far."

The plan of waiting for Harry Tildrake was not a success. An hour passed, and he did not appear. Bellbar had no more time at his disposal, and, as he really did not see what he was to gain by questioning the clerk, he took his leave. As he walked down the street he thought:

"Singular that young Tildrake should be at both ends of this mystery. I shall have to make inquiries about the young man."

The detective was not yet out of sight when the object of his meditation stepped out of a deep doorway—it looked as if he had been in hiding—and went up-stairs quickly.

"I've had a deuce of a time," he remarked, to Mr. Leigh. "Had a tooth out, and the hemorrhage was so profuse that it actually weakened me before it stopped. I hope, sir, that I have not put any one here to great inconvenience."

Mr. Leigh was an easy-going employer, and he assured the clerk that it was all right. He did not mention that the detective had wished to see Harry, and the latter went to his desk without any explanation. He did not appear to be at ease, however. Every time the door opened he looked up with a start, and his associates joked him upon having been made nervous by the pulling of a tooth.

As usual when people judge their fellow-beings they thought they had the matter down to a fine point; as usual, too, in such cases, they were wide of the mark.

Anxiously Harry watched the door, but the detective did not return. The policeman's son was one of the first to leave the office when the day's work was over. He was hurrying up Broadway when he was accosted by a friend.

"Hallo, Till!" was the exclamation, "you are just the person I want to see. I've paid a good, round dollar for a tip on the big race, next Monday. The favorite isn't in it; the 'talent' are going to get left, bad; and I'm going to play the tip and rake in a pile. What say, are you with me?"

"Briggs," Harry answered, with almost fierce earnestness, "when I bet on another horse-race you may send me to Bloomingdale!"

With this declaration the speaker hurried away, leaving Briggs staring after him in open-eyed wonder.

Harry did not go home, but went to a restaurant and had supper. He ate in a mechanical way, and his expression was changeless and dogged. He had something on his mind, and, it seemed, was actuated by a fixed resolution of some kind.

Afterward, he walked about aimlessly for some time, often consulting his watch, and evidently for some certain hour to arrive.

Unknown to him, he was under espionage while he walked. It was no agent from Police Headquarters who was shadowing him, but a boy in rough and ragged clothes, with a liberal coating of dirt smeared over his face. It

would have taken more than one glance on Headstrong Harry's part to recognize this rough-looking youth, yet it was none other than Ace High, minus his uniform, and minus all outward signs of respectability.

The messenger was keeping his resolution to act as amateur detective.

After a while Tildrake closed his watch with a snap and started off in a direct line. Ace followed.

The leader went several blocks, and arrived at a quarter of the city not noted for law-abiding residents—in fact, it was a place which honest people generally preferred to avoid at night, for there the thief, the sand-bagger and the "all-round" law-breaker held sway.

"What's coming?" thought the messenger. "Harry is into it, neck deep, but I'm bound to follow and see the end."

Tildrake turned, opened a door and entered a building without any formality. A sign was over the door, and Ace read the words upon it.

"We-Live-Well Assembly." Humph! maybe you do, but I'll bet you live ill! Wonder if my life will be safe if I go in?"

It was a timely and serious inquiry, but Ace had not gone thus far to give up tamely. He decided to run the risk. Advancing boldly, he opened the door and entered.

CHAPTER X.

IN HARD COMPANY.

ACE HIGH saw only a long hall in front of him when he first opened the door, but knew there was more beyond. He was not so sure of his ability to go far. If the "We-Live-Well Assembly" was at all in fear of the police it was not likely they would admit a boy of his age.

Nothing ventured, nothing won, seemed to be the rule of the occasion, however, and he advanced to the door at the further end of the hall.

Opening it, he saw a scene about like what the sign had prepared him for. There was a good-sized room, with an abundance of tables and chairs, and newspapers on the tables. Twenty persons were present, and, as nearly all were smoking, the air was blue and decidedly impure.

Much to his satisfaction there was no door-keeper, and no one seemed to notice his entrance. He did not linger near the door, but, finding that several other boys of his age were present—nearly all of the party were under twenty in point of age—he quickly mixed with the crowd and sat down at a table.

Then he looked for Harry Tildrake.

The latter was not visible, but an open door at one side revealed a second room, and Ace was about to rise and saunter that way when a boy of fourteen or fifteen came and sat down beside him. It needed only one glance to discover that this interesting person was a very hard citizen.

"How's de world usin' yez?" he asked, amiably.

"Tolerable," Ace replied.

"You're in luck."

"Yes."

"Things ain't wot I wish't they was wid me. It's a-gittin' in New York so a feller has got ter hustle de liveliest way ter pay de piper w'en he dances. S-e?"

"That's about so."

"Got any lay now?"

"No."

"Hev a smoke?"

The hard young citizen extended a half-consumed package of cigarettes. Ace had a vague idea, whether to his credit or otherwise, that he was going to be a smoker some day, but not of cigarettes. He was wise enough to recognize in them the vilest of all forms of tobacco, and one offensive to taste, smell and health. The present occasion was out of the common run, however, and he accepted the libel on the name of tobacco.

"Hev a light?"

This invitation, too, was accepted, but Ace soon managed to drop the cigarette. His companion puffed rapidly, and emitted clouds of smoke from the burning paper.

"De boss is here ter-night," he continued.

"Is he?"

"Yes. Hean' Han'some Herm is in degarden wid a dude."

"Handsome Her n?" questioned Ace.

"Herm Brown, yer know."

"Oh!"

Ace did know. It was not hard to remember the wily Brown who had led Headstrong Harry on to bet so disastrously on the race when at Mulgraft's.

"Who's the dude?" Ace asked.

"Don't know. He's a swell."

"Not a member?"

"Naw. Looks like a pigeon such as we pluck. See?"

"Good thing there are such."

"Bet yer life! Say, I'm in de hardest luck, Pete."

Ace saw that the young fellow's familiar way was due to the fact that he had mistaken him for somebody else. The cigarette-smoker showed how great was his confidence in the real Pete by going on:

"Cracked a crib de udder night an' never got a shiner."

"Things work that way, sometimes."

"Worked dat way dis time. Flippy Jim an' me did de job. Flippy, he picked a lock, an' we entered an office. We found an old tub of a safe, an' had no trouble ter open it, but never got a dollar. De blamed safe was empty. See?"

"Where was this?"

"Down on Broadway—Marker, Gane & Leigh's. You see, Flippy had seen de old feller at de head of de firm, an' he looked to be so rich dat Flippy thought de safe must be full of plunkers. You can't tell de lay of de land by clothes. See?"

Ace High was interested to the point of excitement, but managed to remain calm, outwardly.

"Wasn't there anything in the safe?"

"Only a few business papers."

"Strange there was no money. Did you look sharp?"

"We did dat."

"Queer! Maybe the papers hid it."

"Naw. We pulled out every scrap of paper an' looked at it. See? Ef there had been a ten-center in it, we'd have got on. Dat's what we was dere for. But we didn't get a red!"

"They must do a small business."

"Naw. Good-sized 'stablishment."

"Think I've seen the store. Marker, Gane & Leigh, you say?"

"Yes. Ought to be Snide & Co. It's a shame to git a couple A 1 men to make a break an' den eucher dem so. Dat's w'ot hurts a feller's pride. See?"

"Of course I do. When was it you did the job?"

"Last Tuesday night."

"Heard from it yet?"

"Naw. We thinks de coppers is runnin' a still-hunt, but dey won't git us fellers. We ain't no chumps in de biz. See?"

Ace High saw very clearly what his disreputable companion wished to convey, but the hard young citizen had only added to the mystery of the robbery at Marker, Gane & Leigh's. The firm, and the police, were puzzling over the question: Why had the burglars not taken the money that was in the safe? Now, here was a young person who avowed himself one of the burglars, and added that not a dollar of money had been in the safe.

Yet, three hundred dollars had been locked up in the safe the afternoon before, and the same sum had been there the next morning.

What did it mean?

An explanation flashed upon Ace—an explanation so sudden and startling as to stagger him, metaphorically, and his emotion must have been noticed if the self-avowed burglar had not been engaged in lighting another cigarette.

This person then arose.

"I'll see you later, Petey," he observed.

"I'm goin' ter give Growler Joe a steer. Bimeby we'll go out for a cruise. See? Keep de locker on yer jaw, Petey, ol' man!"

With an affable gesture he walked away, and Ace felt very much like doing the same thing. What he had heard had shaken his faith in Harry Tildrake, and he felt like giving up the case in despair.

"But I won't leave until I've seen what Harry is about," he decided.

Rising, he went to the door of the inner room. He saw there a place which was an attempt to imitate a summer "garden." There was a fountain, and numerous potted shrubs and trees were scattered around in all places. Among these were other chairs, and men and youths seated in conversation.

It was not long before Ace discovered Tildrake. He had two companions, and one glance was enough to make their identity plain to him. He recognized Herman Brown and Bartholomew Ward.

All three were in earnest conversation.

"That settles it," Ace thought. "Harry's a goner!"

His first impression, however, was changed as he watched. Tildrake might be a "goner," as he had picturesquely expressed it, but the police-

man's son was not finding any pleasure in his present company. His expression was grave—almost desperate—and he appeared to be making an appeal to his companions.

Ward and Brown evidently had minds moved by happier feelings. They did not look serious; they were very much at their ease; and now and then an amused smile crossed the face of one of them, as if he enjoyed Harry's vain struggles.

"He's got enough of such company," was the High Card's second verdict, "but he's too late to back out. It's just as everybody has prophesied for years; he's kept bad company until he's got into a fix."

Messenger 999 was eager to overhear what they were saying, and circumstances favored him.

Just behind Harry there was a potted shrub, and back of it a table. He went there and sat down. He was partially screened from notice, and even if Ward and Brown should chance to look at him, his old clothes, disheveled hair and patches of dirt were enough to make a very fair disguise.

He proceeded to listen.

"You have always professed to be my friends," observed Tildrake, bitterly.

"So we are, dear boy," answered Ward.

"You act like it!"

"Is that sarcasm?"

"What else can it be? You are bound to ruin me!"

"Now, my dear boy, you ought not to talk so—"

"Let the blamed fool talk!" interrupted Brown.

"What did you call me?" demanded Harry, hotly.

"A fool!"

"Be careful! I won't bear that."

"What will you do?"

"I'll tell what I know about the robbery—"

"Informers usually get fifty per cent. off; you would get out of it with three years, possibly. But that would not heal your lacerated feelings. Your father, and the whole world would know you as the thief—"

"I am not the thief."

"You are an accomplice. Come, Til, there is no use of your squirming. You are in the swim, and you know as well as I do that it means a long jaunt 'up the river' to be nabbed. You and I don't want to be railroaded, just yet."

"Our dear boy is not so foolish as that," remarked Ward, in his oily way. "When he has thought this matter all over he will see wherein he is wrong, and do us justice."

"First, do me justice!" Harry exclaimed. "I cannot, will not, be party to this infamy."

"What are you going to do?" Brown asked, with a sneer.

"It is for you to do—to do justice."

"Til, we've had quite enough of this. You have my answer, and I shall stick to it. Now, you have your choice between keeping your mouth shut and going to prison. That's all!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE HARD YOUNG CITIZEN MAKES TROUBLE.

TILDRAKE sat in gloomy silence. The sobriquet of "Headstrong Harry" fitted him no longer. He had run the race of fast life bravely, and had brought up at the usual point. Step by step he had gone from perversity to rebellion, to fast life, dissipation, evil company and crime. At last, he had the inevitable reward.

He had never meant any harm, and his natural bent was not that of a criminal, yet he sat that night surrounded by law-breakers of all grades, and was hopelessly in the power of two of the lot.

For a moment the degradation of the situation overcame fear and remorse, and he looked around at his companions. Nearly all were coarse, brutal, ignorant and low. He would have been ashamed to be seen with them on the street, yet his own headlong course had forced him into their company.

He was truly repentant then, but repentance had come too late.

"Confess, dear boy, that you were hasty," gently advised Ward. "You should not speak severely of your friends—"

"Friends!" echoed Harry, bitterly.

Herman Brown touched his arm.

"If you don't like our company, get out!" the sharper angrily directed.

"Brown, if you will grant my request—"

"That will do. I won't make the idiot of myself that you ask, and you may as well understand it. Drop the subject, now and forever!"

All of the pleasant and bland ways with which

Brown had lured Harry on in the months past had disappeared.

He at last had the victim in the toils, and did not care what he thought or how much he writhed under the lash.

Ward, however, was more cautious and far seeing. Before then he had known men to sacrifice themselves in order to accomplish a certain end, and, though Brown thought he had Tildrake where the latter would not dare to say a word, the wily elder man was not so certain.

He gave Brown a secret, warning touch, and then addressed Harry in his usual way:

"Dear boy, don't be downcast. This matter is not so serious as it seems. What matter whether a man loses his money thus, or in Wall street, or in a fire, or some other way? Gone, it is useless, anyhow. Now, Harry, my boy cheer up! We will loan you what you need, and you can play the races next week for all you're worth."

"Curse the races!" Tildrake exclaimed.

"Eh?"

"I've put my last dollar in the morgue of happiness."

"So?"

"My downfall begins from the hour I began to bet. A millionaire is excusable for risking money on a horse's legs; a poor man is not. It is like a race between blind men and those who can see. The blind never win, or, if they do, they next time drop more than they have won. The running races keep thousands of men, born in my rank of life, in constant poverty. They are race-mad. Better for them if the world had no horses."

Brown's lips curled contemptuously as he heard this bitter speech. He managed to make a good thing out of the races, and did it at the expense of just such innocents as Harry Tildrake.

"Maybe you don't get your 'tips' of the right party, my boy," suggested Ward.

"As a rule I've gone on my own judgment, but I've paid two different persons for tips. Brown recommended one of them."

"Haven't you won on his tips?" Brown asked.

"In small chances, yes; in big ones, no."

"Even an expert can't hit 'em up every time."

"I can suggest a very reliable man to buy tips of," continued Ward.

"I've made my last bet on a race!"

Tildrake spoke with resolution, and deep disappointment became pictured in Ward's face.

Ace High began to suspect that these men had fleeced Harry systematically. He had heard that there were sharks, who, making a business of giving "tips," conducted their business, with the aid of confederates, so that they literally were able to rob those who patronized them. With thousands of foolish men race-mad, it was a wide field and easy to work.

Ward showed his cunning by not pressing the subject, but devoted all his efforts to getting Harry into a more contented frame of mind. He did not succeed. The policeman's son had come there that night to accomplish a certain object. He had failed, and the failure left him gloomy and wretched.

The messenger decided that he had remained long enough in his present company.

His trip had borne fruit. He knew that Tildrake had been foolish enough to get on good terms with two consummate scoundrels, and, as a natural consequence, had become mixed up in crooked work. That he had engaged as an ally of either Brown or Ward was not likely, but now that he wished to sever all connection with them, he found himself in their power.

Plainly, Ace could not help him by remaining, and, as they were not likely to tell all their secrets in public, it would be useless to linger in hopes of learning more.

"I'll scoot while I can," the messenger thought. "Their here isn't the kind an honest person likes to breathe. It's full of robbery, fraud and all kinds of lawlessness."

He rose and started for the exit, but had gone only a few steps when he encountered his late acquaintance, the cigarette fiend, and a big man who had an air of authority. The former's face lighted up at sight of Ace.

"Dere's de blokey!" he exclaimed, with his usual elegant form of speech. "You kin see fur yerself."

Ace tried to pass on, but the two blocked his path.

"See yere!" began the man, "who be you?"

"Ain't got no card with me," returned Ace, assuming a manner and choice of words fit for the company.

"Wot yer doin' yere?"

"Nothing."

"You've got ter do somet'ing—you's got ter explain wot you's doin' yere. See?"

"De blokey played off he was Petey Cray, but he's no more Petey dan I be. He's a spy; dat's wot he is, an' he's in yere to pipe on some chap. See?"

Ace had been troubled at first sight of the cigarette fiend, for he was afraid the latter might have discovered that he had poured his confidence into wrong ears. Now he found his fears confirmed, and actual danger menaced him. The language, the appearance and the manner of the two persons confronting him showed that they were genuine New York roughts.

"You'll hev ter explain," the man declared.

"R d, here, says you's ain't a member of de club, an' we don't want dis place infested wid outsiders. See? Move your jaw an' let us know who you's be, an' by what right you are in here."

"Isn't this a public place?" Ace asked, assuming an air of innocence.

"Naw; it ain't a public place."

"Then I'll apologize for coming in. Sorry I intruded, but I saw others come, and nobody objected when I came. Begging your pardon, I'll leave."

"Dat won't go down!" declared the hard youth who rejoiced in the brief sobriquet of "Red." Shaking his fist in Ace's face he added:

"You's a spy; dat's wot you be!"

"Nonsense!" returned Ace, managing to laugh. "I don't care anything about other folks' affairs."

"Call Ward!" the unknown man directed.

"Red" hastened to obey this order. Ace was tempted to make a dash for freedom, but even if he could pass the man, there seemed to be too many others in the way. One word from the former would cause a score of persons to seek to catch him.

Clearly, flight would be folly.

"This is a great go!" he remarked, still pretending to be amused. "What's up, anyhow?"

His companion vouchsafed no reply, but "Red" came up, followed by Bartholomew Ward. The latter looked sharply at Ace, but did not recognize him.

"Dat's de feller," Red explained.

"Bless me! I see no harm in this small lad," admitted Ward, who could tell something about a person's nature, if not about his intentions.

"But he pretended to be Petey," urged Red.

"No, I didn't!" stoutly answered Ace. "He called me Pete, this young man did; but I never claimed the name, and don't know any Pete."

"Who are you?"

"Andy Jenkins. I live over by Robens's grocery-store. I just come in because I thought this a public place. Me, want to harm you? Come off!"

His easy, frank outward manner impressed Ward, but Red saw the result and changed his tactics:

"Fact is, Cap, I thought he was Petey, an' I talked too free. I let him on ter certain secrets, an' some of de members of dis club will get de sack ef you's let de feller go. See?"

"Red, you're a fool!" Ward declared.

"Boss, I's dead sorry, but I was mistaken. I'll leave it ter any of de fellers ef he ain't a dead ringer for Petey. See? Could I tell dat there was two fellers dat looked jest alike? Naw!"

Mr. Red seemed to feel that he had made an eloquent defense, and he threw himself into an attitude and extended one arm like the handle to a pump.

"If you have no brains," went on Mr. Ward, with warmth, "you had better quit New York. What did you tell him?"

"Come aside, an' let me tell you's private. I don't want ter spread de facts any more. See?"

The tough young citizen was a good deal humbled by Ward's severe rebuke, and his manner was meek and crestfallen. He and Ward had a talk which lasted for some time, and the latter did not appear to grow any more amiable. When they returned Ace read ill news in his face.

"You'll have to stay here, boy!" he curtly declared.

"Thought I wasn't wanted here."

"We can't let you go out until we investigate your case, and see if you are to be trusted. It won't hurt you to sleep here to-night. If you prove harmless you shall go free; if I decide that you are a spy, I'll see to it that you don't go out to give our secrets away. Boys, lock him up!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE HEAD AT THE DOOR.

"WELL, I'm in for it, sure-pop!"

This comment came from Asa High in a rue-

ful voice. All of his arguments had been disregarded, and he was locked in a room which adjoined those where the members of the so-called club were having an enjoyable time in each others' select company.

He had refrained from making himself known, or calling upon Harry Tiltlake for aid, because he was strongly of the opinion that this would only result in getting Harry into trouble. The latter's standing in his present society was not very high, and any opposition on his part to the will of the ruling powers would be worse than useless.

The High Card's prison-room was about as bare and grim as it could be. One table and two chairs were there, but only because they had been discarded after being broken in the other room.

A second door, which probably had led to the yard, had been stoutly boarded up, and the solitary window being in like condition, they evidently considered it a safe prison.

"Asa G. High," grimly observed the owner of that name, "your cognomen ought to be Dennis Mud. This is a bad scrape. You ain't 'in it,' but you are in it—deep and bad. How are you to get out?"

He surveyed the room carefully, but found no answer to his question.

He seemed to be a helpless prisoner.

The situation was vexatious in the extreme. Since coming to the alleged club-rooms he had learned who the burglars had been at Marker, Gane & Leigh's. If he could get away, this would be valuable information for the police. He also had other strong suspicions—but they, and he, were locked up in the old room.

Several times he repeated the tour of investigation around the place, but, lacking all tools with which to work, he could see no way of breaking out.

Two hours or more passed in this helpless fashion. Then there was a peculiar change in the situation.

He heard the clicking of a key in a lock, and the sound seemed to come from the rear door. Then a breath of fresh air touched his face, and he knew that the door behind the cross-boards had been opened.

Who had done this, and what was the object?

He advanced and stood close to the point of interest.

There was a grinding, grating sound on the other side, and one end of a narrow board was forced back out of place, and toward him. He could see the stars through the aperture, but that was not what interested him the most.

A human hand grasped the loosened board and removed it entirely; a human head appeared in the space thus left. It was a rough-looking head, with a forest of tangled hair and beard. Its owner fixed his gaze upon the prisoner.

"Hullo, youngster!" he exclaimed.

"Hullo!" Asa answered, doubtfully.

"Got things all ter yerself, ain't yer?"

"Yes, but I want to get out. Can you help me?"

"Get out? What for?"

"Don't you belong to the gang?"

"Don't belong ter no gang."

"Speak low!" the messenger cautioned, quickly. "For your life, don't let the men in there hear you!"

He pointed to the door of the front room.

"Men in there, eh? Reckon I'll skip, then."

"Wait! Help me get off these boards."

The Trump Card's hopes had gone up fast and high. Appearances indicated that the stranger was a burglar. Better any company for him than that of Ward and his gang of ruffians. If he could get out of the prison-room, he thought that escape would be easy.

The unknown regarded him with an appearance of slow-witted wonder.

"Be you shut up?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Wal, hang me ef I don't let yer out! I don't approve o' no sech work. Lay holt o' that board, an' pull slow an' gentle. We mustn't make no noise."

Higher rose the messenger's hope, and he gave his aid at the board. It was not long before the opening had been enlarged so that Ace could crawl through, and, when this was done, he lost no time in going.

Once more he stood free under the open sky. "Stranger," he said, earnestly, "I'm very much obliged to you. You've got me out of a bad fix."

"Don't mention it, sonny."

"It mean's a heap to me."

"Who be the fellers in thar?"

"Oh! it's a club."

"Crooks?"

Prudence came to Ace's aid; he resolved not to say too much.

"Oul I guess not, but they're down on me."

"Know any on 'em by name?"

"No."

"Wot do they do fur a livin'?"

"I don't even know that. They are strangers to me, but they got down on me without any good reason, and shut me up; so you see you came along just in time. I'm about as thankful as they make 'em. Now, what chance is there for me to get to the street?"

"There's chance enough, though you probab'ly couldn't find it alone. Come erlong, an' I'll show ye out. Reckon I ain't got no errand 'round here, nobow."

Ace was careful not to inquire why his companion was there. The evidence that he was a burglar seemed too strong to be disputed, but that did not interest the messenger-boy. He was willing the man should go back and steal the whole house, Bartholomew Ward and all.

The stranger led the way, and they entered a dark and narrow alley.

"This leads ter the street, after makin' a bit of a bend," the leader remarked. "You pass me, an' go ahead, an' I'll kinder cover our retreat."

Asa could see no use for such a precaution, but he set out to obey his companion. He started to pass the latter, but, as he did so, the supposed burglar suddenly seized him, and his broad hand was clasped over the High Card's mouth.

Although taken wholly by surprise, it flashed upon the boy that he had been entrapped. The motive for the act and the identity of the trapper he did not stop to consider, but at once devoted all his attention to an effort to break his captor's hold.

This attempt was wholly useless.

The man whistled softly and a second person came to his aid. They lifted Asa and bore him out of the passage.

A blind alley lay beyond, and in this stood a carriage. The men thrust their prisoner into the vehicle, entered after him, and then the outfit was started by a third man who had remained on the box.

The messenger-boy was surprised and confused. He did not understand this move at all, though one thing was very evident: he was in the power of enemies, and the abduction did not portend anything favorable to him.

He renewed his struggles, but his strength availed nothing against the force opposed to him.

Evidently it was the intention of the driver to go as fast as he could and not get arrested for fast driving. Now and then he gave the horses a clip with the whip, and they bowled along over the rough pavement until the passengers danced like rubber balls.

The prisoner could not tell in what direction they were going, but their course was always on one street. At length they came to a halt, and Asa's chief captor looked out of the window.

"Here we are!" he observed.

He threw open the door, and was about to lift Ace out when second thought caused him to pause. With the aid of handkerchiefs the captive's hands were bound and his mouth bandaged. Thus he was incapacitated from giving any alarm, and from making resistance.

All left the carriage.

Ace saw a pier, a river, and twinkling lights far beyond. He knew then where they were.

He was forced to walk out on the pier. A vessel of considerable size lay there, but the activity which existed on her deck at once suggested to the messenger that she was about to be started on an ocean voyage. Without any ceremony Ace was marched upon the deck, and then to a retired point where his feet were bound.

The last move rendered him wholly helpless, and he was rolled over in a retired place like a mere piece of cargo.

"Boy," then spoke his chief captor, "do you know where you are bound for?"

Naturally, the bandage prevented any reply.

"This ship is bound for India," the speaker added, "and she will be gone just three years. You will go as a passenger—unless they drop you overboard in mid-ocean!"

CHAPTER XIII.

PRISONERS UNDER DECKS.

THIS was not pleasant news for Ace High, but he saw no reason to doubt it. He had been along the wharves in the past often enough to get a pretty clear idea of the various vessels

that lay there at different times, and was quite ready to believe he was on a craft bound for a voyage on the open sea.

Although he could not answer, his captor continued to give information.

"You have made yourself obnoxious in New York by meddling with what don't concern you, and this is the result. We are men of honest and peaceable minds, and will not do you any harm—here! We have arranged with Captain Tribbs, however, to manage you, and his power is absolute. He can take you the three years' cruise, or toss you overboard for the sharks, as he sees fit!"

One of the captors had gone away, evidently to see some one in authority. He now returned, and, after a few low words with the last speaker, they lifted Ace and carried him below.

He was taken to the fore-castle, and stowed away in the most retired place.

"Here we leave you," was the parting comment. "If you live to see India, remember us to the natives there. So-long!"

With a low, mocking laugh the man turned away, and he and his associates left the place.

The High Card could hardly realize the situation. He had never had any aspirations to become a sailor, and no money to go to sea for the pleasure of the voyage; hence his mind had dwelt but rarely on the subject. Now, at one step and in one hour, he was transformed from an easy-going landsman to a captive on the salt water.

"This comes of turning detective!" he thought, ruefully. "I think I'll leave such work to the regular force, after this. A boy hasn't got bone, muscle and beef enough for the job. I'll quit—Will I? No, by jinks! It's war to the knife, now, and if I get out of this pinch, I'll be after the enemy all the stronger. But if I get tossed overboard in mid-ocean, my chances will be minus nothing."

He lay and listened to the sounds which showed the sailors busy getting ready for the start, but these sounds had no music to his ears.

He had been aware that other men were in the fore-castle, for he could hear the sound of voices. The speakers drew near, and he determined to bestir himself.

The captain of the vessel must be in the plot against him, but that did not prove that every one on board was a villain.

He began to make all the noise that his bandaged mouth would allow. This attracted the attention of the men, who were two in number, and they approached.

Then Ace made an unexpected discovery.

One of them was an old acquaintance—Nat Hicks, the pine-woodsman from Michigan!

It was a great surprise, but one of equal importance. There was no question as to Old Nat's honesty. The messenger renewed his guttural appeals for help, and his situation was soon discovered. When this was done, Hicks fell to with a will, and Asa was soon free from his bonds.

"What in time does this mean?" the woodsman asked. "Condemned funny system ter tie a cabin-boy up so—you be the cabin-boy, ain't yer?"

"Mr. Hicks, don't you know me?" Asa demanded.

"Know you? Wal, hardly."

"I'm Ace High."

"Who?"

"Ace High."

"I never heard that name but once—"

"I'm the same person."

"Then you've changed amazin'ly. Don't see no sign o' the trim lad in his pooty telegraph suit."

"Surely, you know me."

"I s'pose so, though I skeerely b'lieve what I know. Yes, you're him; but, what on 'arth does it mean? Didn't know you's a cabin-boy, too."

"Mr. Hicks, listen! This is no time for unnecessary words; to use such might be the ruin of both of us. I was brought here by enemies, tied up as you see. The intention was to have me carried to sea, and then, possibly, flung overboard to drown. You see the kind of folks we are among. I'm going to skip."

"So be I, you bet! I come ter visit a friend, Jack Smith, here, afore he went ter sea. He kin go ef he likes sech a cap'n, but the sooner I git my foot on that thar pier, the sooner I'll feel easy in mind. Come on!"

"Wait a little. We had better go separately, for if they see you in my company, you will get into trouble, too."

"By George! my lad, I mean to stand by you,

an' fight for yer, if it comes ter that. We go tergether, or git nabbed in pairs."

Old Nat spoke with the hearty kindness to be expected from him, but Ace remained prudent.

"We shall run less risk by going one at a time. Of course you can go openly, but I must come the soft-and-easy act. But I shall not object to having you sail in and give me a lift if I get into trouble."

"You bet, I'll do it."

"It'll be no fool of a job ter run the gantlet," observed sailor Jack Smith.

"It's got ter be done."

"Let me reconnoiter."

Smith went away, while Ace gave Hicks a partial idea of how he was brought there a prisoner, though he did not pause to refer to the circumstances which had led up to it.

They were still talking when two men appeared. They expected to see Jack Smith, but Old Nat was not a little startled when he perceived that one was Tribbs, the captain of the vessel. The latter looked at Ace in angry surprise.

"Who has dared to release this boy?" he demanded.

"I'm the chap that did it," Hicks boldly returned.

"Did you know he was my runaway cabin-boy?"

"I knowed he was not."

"What?"

"I know this boy myself—knowed him afore ever you set eyes on him. Hang it all! what do you mean, sir, by kidnappin' a child like him? It's a low an' dastardly piece o' business, by Cain!"

Captain Tribbs had thought to overawe Old Nat by assuming a bullying manner, but was so far from doing it that the woodsman was facing him belligerently, and giving back word for word.

"Who are you who meddles on my vessel?" the sea-villain blustered.

"Your equal, mister!"

"My equal?"

"Every inch, both as ter weight, statoo, muskle an' grit, while as fur manhood—wal, a rattler would put you ter blush for decency, ef you was knowin' ter the plot ter abduct this lad. Ef you's ter stay in port I'd complain on ye ter the constables, by Cain! As 'tis, I leave yer ter justice above man's. Asa, we'll go!"

Tribbs had been eying the fearless speaker curiously. He now stepped back and called for help, and three sailors came in immediately.

"Seize that man!" he commanded, pointing to Nat.

"What?" cried the woodsman.

"At him!"

Evidently the sailors were accustomed to obey all kinds of orders. They took the present one as a matter of course, and at once moved upon Old Nat. They were warmly received. Hicks had not been through rough life for a score of years for nothing. He knocked down the first man, and followed up the stroke by piling the second on top of his leader.

The sailors, however, were old hands at such affrays, and the four went at Nat as soon as the fallen ones could regain their feet.

When two more men came at Tribbs's call, both Hicks and Ace High were soon overcome and bound.

"Tumble them down there!" directed the captain, pointing. "When we have leisure we'll stow them away where they will be out of the race; just now I want all of you on deck. Leave them there!"

And the captors went away in a body.

"Ace!" spoke Old Nat, soberly.

"Yes!"

"I've been in all sorts o' measly fixes, but never one that took the starch out o' me like this. Blame it! I didn't know that was real pirates in the City o' York."

"If there is a species of rascal we haven't got, I don't know where or what he is."

"It's melancholy!"

"Mr. Hicks, where is Jack Smith?"

"Dunno. Glad he ain't tied up."

"Will he desert us?"

"Who? Jack?"

"Of course."

"Not much! You bet he won't! Jack ain't that sort of a biped critter. No, sir; he will stan' by us through the war, but I ain't sure he will have any great chance. The cap'n has called all hands, an' it might go hard with Jack if he made a hulge jest now."

"But if he waits until we get under way—and they seem to be doing that now—there will be no chance for us to get clear."

"Don't know. Kin you swim?"

"Yes."

"So kin I, like a fish. Let 'em drop us not over fifty mile from shore an' we kin git back."

Asa's faith in Old Nat's veracity was somewhat shaken by this wonderful claim, but he did not argue the point. Both were silent as they listened to the sounds above which indicated that the vessel would soon be under way.

Whether they were to go with her became a most important question.

They watched for Jack Smith, but he did not appear.

"Here we go!" Hicks observed, suddenly.

Sure enough, they were working away from the pier, and the messenger's face grew longer. Although there was a popular belief that the day of sea-tyrants and sea-outrages was past, the High Card knew that many an abuse was still committed on vessels, and they would certainly be at the mercy of a man who had shown himself a ruffian.

They began to move down the East River, and were off on a voyage the end of which neither could foresee. Their imagination painted nothing pleasant.

CHAPTER XIV.

ADVENTURES AFLOAT.

THE vessel was fairly under way, and moving toward the open salt water, though still on the East River.

"It's a long time since I've been on a ship afore," observed Old Nat, thoughtfully. "Not sence I first crossed the big pond an' landed on Yankee soil."

"You were probably happier then than now," replied Ace High.

"Happier? Wal, no; can't say I was. I had trouble on my mind."

"But you were not kidnapped?"

"No. I was lookin' fur my sister."

"Did you find her?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never!"

There was deep melancholy in the pine-woodsman's voice which forcibly recalled the touch of that mood when he was at the boarding-house. He gave himself up to thought for a moment, and then added:

"I an' that sister was brought up together in Old England. Except another brother, we was the only children. The brother was a good 'eal younger—he an' his fam'ly lives in Liverpool, now—an' so he had a different place in our hearts from what we had fur one another. We was poor, an' my sister took a place as maid to a rich lady who, bein' in poor health, set out on a voyage ter America."

"Of course my sister went along."

"They got hyar, an' then begun ter travel in a slow way, beittin' an invalid. They went ter Saratoga, Niagara an' them places, but never stayed long in one place, so we never knowed where ter expect the next letter from."

"This kep' up fur some time, an' all seemed goin' wal, but we finally got a letter that frightened us. The rich lady had took sick an' died o' fever, an' my sister had nursed her all through it."

"What skeered us was this: When my sister wrote, she 'lowed she was bad worn out, an' admitted she was a bit afeard she was goin' ter be sick, too."

"After that we got no news. We wrote, an' waited, an' watched, but all in vain. No more news ever come. We finally decided that she had died, an' I pulled up stakes an' started fur here ter find out."

"I went ter Injeanny, whar the mistress had died. I found the folks she had been with, but no sister. They tol' me she had left an' gone back ter New York."

"Back here I come, too, but, ter make a long story short, I never found her nor got any news. From the minute she left the Injeanny town she vanished like dew in the mornin' sun."

"What do you think became of her?" Ace asked.

"Dead! Thar ain't no doubt on't. She left the Western town three-quarters sick; beyond doubt, she give out somewhar by the way, an' jest laid down in a stranger's house an' died."

Hicks repeated the big sigh which was so characteristic of his nature and his deep chest, and, after a brief pause, added:

"This thing has preyed on me many a year. Of course we give her up right away, but it was melancholy ter feel that I didn't know whar she laid buried."

"I'm sorry for you, sir," returned Asa.

"I know ye be, lad, fur you've got a heart

like an ox, an' I take to ye mightily. But this ain't ter the pint. Lad, we're goin' fast out toward old ocean."

"I'm afraid we are booked for the voyage."

Old Nat shook his head.

"We'll never live ter finish it. Cap'n Tribbs knows a thing or two, an' he ain't took this piratikel step only ter let us go free bime-by. He will—"

The woodsman stopped short, suddenly remembering that he ought not to add to his companion's fears.

Ace knew by divers signs that they had left the East River behind. After that it would not be a long voyage to the open ocean, and when the shore of Staten Island faded away, they would be wholly at the modern pirate's mercy. What he would do with them was not certain, but the messenger's views were not more hopeful than Nat's.

While both were indulging in these gloomy forebodings, another form appeared in the forecastle, and their spirits took an upward turn as they recognized Jack Smith.

He came to them quickly.

"The time has come to make a break!" he declared. "We are getting close to the Narrows, and it's now or never. Can you swim ashore?"

"Yes."

Both Nat and Ace answered promptly.

"Do you want life-preservers?"

"No."

Smith had been busy with his knife while he talked, and he now made the final stroke. Both were free from their bonds.

"You must steal up to the deck quietly and drop overboard," he continued. "I think it is dark enough so you can make the rifle."

"What'll become of you?" Nat asked.

"I'll go, too."

"Desert?"

"Yes. Tribbs hasn't had time to investigate and see whom you came on board to visit. When he does it would put suspicion on me, anyhow, and, after setting you free, it would be madness for me to stay here and dare his anger. Now, are you ready to go?"

Both Ace and Hicks answered in the affirmative.

"Then here we go."

It was an undertaking full of doubt and danger, and only rendered possible by the fact that Tribbs would not expect an attempt at escape, and would be giving all his attention to his vessel.

After a few more words of caution and advice they made the start. Once on deck they separated, so as to make as little notice as possible, and then it was each for himself.

Ace sauntered over toward the starboard side, assuming a careless air and taking care to keep away from all other persons. The friendly shore of Staten Island had never looked so pleasant, covered though it was with darkness.

No one challenged or opposed him, and he crossed the doubtful space in safety. After that he felt sure of victory. If the worst came he could jump for liberty, though he preferred to carry out the policy of caution outlined by Smith.

Shortly after this the captain heard a slight splash in the water on the starboard side, but gave the matter no thought at that time.

It was, however, his last knowledge of the persons he supposed helpless prisoners below.

At that moment all three were swimming for shore, and to those as much at home in the water as they, this was an easy matter.

In a short time they were standing on the island, watching the vessel recede.

Old Nat laughed heartily.

"That's what I call doin' 'em up slick!" he declared.

"They're out of it," Ace added.

"An' whar be we?"

"Safe as a fly. All we've got to do is to make our way to St. George, take the ferry-boat and go back to New York. Simple as you please."

"Lead the way. This is your native heath, I s'pose, but it ain't mine."

They proceeded on their way, feeling that they had been in great good luck to get out of their predicament so safely and surely. As their thoughts turned away from the receding vessels, Hicks naturally became curious as to how Ace had fallen into so much trouble.

He asked the question, and it brought the High Card's own thoughts back to the robbery at the boarding-house.

He believed that he could tell Hicks just about who had taken his money, but it was a statement he shrunk from making. It would be a terrible blow to Palmer Tildrake to have his son arrested on such a charge.

And Headstrong Harry might yet free himself from the taint of actual participation in the work, doubtful as the possibility seemed.

Anxious to give the policeman's son every possible chance, his loyal neighbor put Hicks off with an evasion which let him know only that a young desperado had taken offense at something he had done, and hired others to kidnap him.

St. George was reached in due time, and the homeward journey made to New York as soon as possible.

When that city was reached all went to the boarding-house, and Jack Smith, having some money, agreed to pay Old Nat's bills until the latter could find out just how his case was to terminate.

The end was near at hand, and full of surprises.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WAGES OF A RECKLESS LIFE.

MR. BELLBAR, detective, entered a jewelry store and nodded affably to the proprietor.

"Allow me to ask, sir, if you have sold the diamond ring which you lately had from the Allenton collection?" Bellbar began, politely.

"You are too late, sir; we have sold it," the jeweler answered.

"I'm sorry to hear that. May I ask who bought it?"

"A young man named Tildrake."

"Recently?"

"On Wednesday."

"I suppose he paid cash?"

"Certainly."

"I don't suppose you have the numbers of the bills he gave you?"

The jeweler looked surprised.

"Really, I don't understand why you ask that."

"It's because I am a detective."

"Great Scott! is anything wrong?"

"Perhaps so; perhaps not. Here is proof that I am what I claim. Now, tell me if you have the numbers of the bills Tildrake gave you."

"I have better than that; I have the bills themselves."

"So you can identify them?"

"Yes. I have stated that the Allenton collection was purchased by me. Really, I am selling it on commission, and, consequently, I have preserved the very bills I have received in each case. See!"

He took a blank-book from the safe. Opening it at a certain point he showed three bank-notes loose between the pages, and upon one page several lines of writing.

"When the collection was sent me," he continued, "the owner wrote a description of each gem, with such comments as he saw fit to make; this blank-book and its original contents was his own idea, and, as I have said, when I make a sale I put the exact money received into the space occupied by the article disposed of. Hence, I am able to make oath that this is the exact money I took from Harry Tildrake."

He spread out the three bills. One was for one hundred dollars, another for twenty, and the third for five dollars.

Bellbar ignored the first and last, but took the twenty and looked at the number.

The faintest possible trace of satisfaction appeared in his face.

"I presume, sir, you will allow me to replace this bill with another of like denomination?" he inquired.

"Certainly."

"And you will swear that you received it from young Tildrake?"

"I will."

"That is sufficient."

"I hope the young man is not in trouble?"

"This bank-note has a history which must be inquired into more fully. As a representative of the law I must ask you not to mention this matter to any one, most of all, not to Tildrake."

"I will comply with your request, fully."

"Thank you."

Bellbar made a few more remarks, and then left the store. He took the Elevated Road, went uptown and called at the residence of the head of the firm of Marker, Gane & Leigh. That gentleman was in, and seemed to be expecting the detective. The latter came to business in a breezy way.

"We are moving on," he observed.

"Have you more evidence?"

"I have another of the twenty-dollar bills."

"Where did you find it?"

"Where young Tildrake passed it."

"Did he really do that?"

"Yes. The day after your loss he was flush,

and he went and bought a diamond ring he had before desired, but could not afford to buy. The day of the purchase was, too, the same on which old Hicks lost his money."

"I did not think this of Tildrake," remarked Marker, with a sigh.

"He has been a fast young man 'round town. He has indulged in wine, light gambling, betting on horse-races, and kindred amusements. A youth who does that is liable to take the final step, and become a criminal at any time."

"You believe that he stole Hicks's money?"

"It cannot be doubted."

"But what about the mystery of our safe?"

Bellbar hesitated.

"I'll say frankly that I do not understand that yet. I can only infer that Tildrake had a lurking suspicion that Hicks might have the numbers of the stolen bank-notes, and when he—your clerk—came in that morning and found the safe open and unguarded, he exchanged the harmless money in it for an equal amount of his stolen plunder."

"That does not look reasonable, for he would thereby throw out a danger-line, hooked and baited, which might catch him."

"Criminals are noted for making false steps."

"And it don't explain why the safe-breakers left the money."

"True."

"I feel that there is yet more to learn."

"There is, and I am going to work to learn it. Tildrake is guilty—of that there is not a shadow of doubt—and I will have him behind the bars very soon; but I shall look for more evidence before I spring the trap. I shall set a snare for his feet; he will probably walk into it."

The detective rose to leave. Marker did not detain him, and the latter was soon alone.

"This is a most unhappy affair!" he murmured. "I am exceedingly sorry to see the boy come to such an end, but it is the usual result of a fast life."

Bellbar went home, produced writing-paper, and penned the following letter:

"H. TILDRAKE:—

"DEAR SIR:—I am a gent who is in need of kash, being down on my Luck. I respectfully ask a loan from you. I am honest, and will pay you with interest, as soon as I win on the Races. The reason why I come to you is that I am On to You. You was the gent that Done Up the old cove from Mishigaun, and got his Boodle. I Hate to use severe laudgwidge, but Biznis Iz Biznis, so I will clothes by saying that if you do not Meet me at Houston and Crosby, to-night, at 8.30, I shall Blow on You. This is right from the card. You've got a Good thing and are Out of Sight—I want to be In It. Divvy, or I squeal! You will know me when We Meet by a Diamond in my Nek-tigh. 8.30, p. m.; Houston & Crosby. Don't fail! ONE OF THE BOYS."

When Mr. Bellbar had read this over it seemed to amuse him, for he smiled and chuckled.

"That'll fetch him!" he remarked.

He addressed this remarkable epistle to Harry, and then went out to a telegraph-office and sent it by a messenger. There was just time enough to catch Tildrake before he left the office for the day.

The result proved that he had timed the modern Mercury well. Headstrong Harry received the message just as he was leaving the office for the day, and tore the envelope open in the hall below.

The contents made the color desert his face. He did not suspect the trap, but took the letter for what it purported to be—the threat of some unscrupulous sporting man who had learned a part, if not all, of a dangerous secret.

As soon as he could recover his coolness in a measure he went home. The plea of a headache prevented unpleasant comments upon the lightness of the supper he ate. He then retired to his room with a fixed purpose.

He had no intention of going to the corner of Houston and Crosby streets. Instead he intended to be miles away before midnight, and, unless he was brought back by force, he expected the departure to be a last, long farewell to New York.

As he hurriedly packed in a valise the few articles he wished to take in his flight he was truly a penitent young man.

After eight, when all was fully completed, he put his valise in a corner of the room, and turned his steps into the hall for his bat.

He had proceeded but a few feet when he was halted, and a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder.

He turned and saw Bellbar, the detective!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BOY IN THE CLOSET.

ACE HIGH, that day, was just feeling that he

might escape without another commission, until the following day, when a man entered the telegraph office and wrote a brief message. The High Card was called upon to deliver it.

He read the name and address, beginning with idle indifference, and ending with uncommon interest.

The name was Herman Brown.

For a moment Ace hesitated. The standing between him and Brown was of a precarious nature, and, after what had occurred the night before, it was clear that Brown must know there was danger to him and his associates. When disguised in dirt and rags Ace had not been recognized as Messenger 999 by Brown, but was it certain, now, that 999 would not be recognized as the ragged object of "Red's" ill-will?

The High Card's hesitation was soon over. He did not believe that Brown could capture or injure him, and, as for himself, he wanted every possible chance to see the law-breaker.

He took the message and went to deliver it.

The house which had the doubtful honor of sheltering Mr. Brown was not ill-looking. On the contrary, it was a neat brick edifice, and would have been fairly prepossessing in Asa's eyes if it had not been Brown's home.

Ace rung the door-bell.

"Mr. Brown in?" he asked, when a languid-appearing woman, with bleached hair, appeared.

"I presume so; third floor, rear."

With this careless response she retreated to the parlor, moving as if existence meant hard labor.

"Guess she ain't the boss, or she would have more interest in what's goin' on here," thought Ace, as he wended his way up-stairs to "third floor, rear."

Arriving in that vicinity he knocked on the door, but without receiving any reply. When he had twice repeated the summons he decided that Brown was not in.

The temptation to see the place was so strong that, under the impulse of the moment, Asa yielded and opened the door. He saw an ordinary-appearing room, though unexpectedly good for the street, and various articles scattered about told that Herman had luxurious tastes and was able to satisfy them.

An envelope and a sheet of paper, evidently notes, lay upon the table, and tempted the boy anew. He advanced and looked at the letter. Addressed to Brown, its few outlines were right to the point:

"Have you given any of the bundle to a clerk named Tildrake? A friend of mine who knows a detective tells me there is an investigation on; that there were bills with known numbers; and that this Tildrake is under suspicion. It may be a useless warning, but I thought I would give you a tip."

The signature was a name unknown to Ace, but the note itself was so peculiar that he determined to have possession of it. In a moment more it was in his pocket, and he had turned toward the door, when he suddenly heard footsteps in the hall.

A sense of danger flashed upon him, and the open door of a closet was a thing so inviting, just then, that he stepped inside to await the result.

It was a fresh shock when the hall-door opened and two men entered. Through the crevice he had left, Ace High saw and recognized them; they were Herman Brown and Bartholomew Ward.

Brown promptly, and somewhat viciously, it seemed, placed a chair for Ward.

"Sit down," he directed, "and let us come right to business. Prove your claim to the possession of a long head by marking out a road of safety."

"I can't guard against the kid," answered Ward. "He has gone to sea."

"Gone to sea!"

"Yes; and all on account of that young ruffian, 'Red' Tribbs. He had no faith in my judgment at the club-rooms, and, being afraid that High would escape and divulge the secrets he—Red—had so idiotically told, he worked a scheme of his own with success. Red had an uncle, Captain Tribbs, who was commander of a vessel about to sail for Calcutta, and Red made a rush, saw the captain and gained his consent to take the telegraph messenger along on the voyage. Then Red sent friends to get High, and it was they who broke into our temporary prison and took High out. He was carried to the vessel, and is now out on the ocean. This I have learned from one of the fellows who helped Red."

Ace High smiled. The statement was valuable to him, and, also, he was amused to see how

far Ward was wide of the truth as to the present whereabouts of the aforesaid "High."

Clearly, however, the wily Bartholomew knew too much about him.

"Well, the kid is out of the way, then," Brown replied.

"For the time being, but it was a stupid move. If he returns alive—what then?"

"He may not. Let us speak of Tildrake. I'm afraid he means mischief."

"But I thought you had him fully in your power."

"So I have, but he is not the plastic creature I thought him. To put it plainly, Tildrake is weak and reckless, but not wicked—excuse my choice of words, but I speak in the way of the so-called respectable part of the community. Instead of going lower, now he is down, Headstrong Harry has made a brace, forsaken the evil gods, reformed, etc., and is all up in arms."

"That's a pity."

"You ought not to have let Tildrake get you in his grip, at all."

"What could I do?" Brown asked, irritably.

"Old Nat Hicks exhibited his money in the boarding-house. My friend, Collins, sat near and saw it. Collins came to me, told me about it, and we laid our plan. I went to the house a little after midnight. Collins let me in, and I entered Hicks's room and gobbled the cash!"

Ace High could hardly restrain his excitement. Here was a confession, open and plain, and it was valuable beyond description.

"I was leaving the house, and Hicks's money was safe in my pocket," continued Brown, "when I encountered Tildrake. It was a mutual surprise, for neither knew that the other was there and I became rattled."

"Foolish man!" Ward commented.

"When the robbery was made public Tildrake would know in the twinkling of an eye who the robber was. I determined to make him my accomplice."

"I knew he was dead broke, and, once on the street, I told him I had been drumming up his sporting friends, and that we had made up a purse of four hundred and fifty dollars for him. I should have limited the amount to less than a hundred, but, as I said before, I was rattled."

"He took the money without a suspicion—took it greedily. He became my accomplice—the sharer of my spoils; but you know how it has worked. As soon as he knew the money was stolen money he kicked like a steer."

"If he gives me away I shall swear that he was with me from start to finish, but I think he is bound to squeal, even if it sends him to prison for years. Now, what's to be done?"

Ward rubbed his fat chin in a perplexed way. "To contrive a way to head the young fool off requires inspiration," he finally responded, "and inspiration comes only through a suitable tonic. Bring me whisky!"

Brown rose with alacrity. The getting of the whisky ought not to have been a matter of interest to Ace High, but it proved to be of vast interest.

Straight toward the closet came Handsome Herm.

He opened the door.

The High Card had foreseen the danger, even if only for a moment; and his wits proved quick enough to meet the emergency. He knew that only one thing would save him, and was prepared to act accordingly.

As Brown swung the door back Ace made a headlong dive, threw all of his weight against the sharper's stomach, and then, as the latter went over like a tenpin, rushed past Ward, and out of the room and house.

As good luck would have it, he almost ran into three policemen as he emerged from the street door.

"Stop!" he cried, in joyful excitement. "You're wanted up-stairs!"

CHAPTER XVII.

ACE STEMS THE TIDE.

WHEN Harry Tildrake saw Bellbar at his side he felt sure that the hour of disgrace had come, and his face became very pale.

"Whither so fast, young sir?" the detective asked, quietly.

Sulky defiance came to Harry's aid.

"That's my business," he returned, quickly.

"Perhaps you were going out of town?"

"What of it?"

"I must request you to stay here."

"You have nothing to do with my movements, sir."

"The law has!"

"The law?"

"Yes. In brief, I am under the necessity of

arresting you, young man. For Palmer Tildrake's sake I regret it, but I have no choice. The charge is that you robbed Old Nat Hicks."

"I am innocent," Harry sullenly responded. "I hope you can prove it. Shall we go back and tell your father?"

The prisoner looked at the old home, and then broke down entirely.

"I would rather die than have him know of my disgrace, innocent though I am of taking Hicks's money; but, as he must know of my arrest, anyhow, it may as well be revealed now, when I can aver my innocence under my own home-roof."

Even the time-hardened detective looked in pity at the speaker. It was hard to see the son of honest parents go wrong, but it was an old, old story.

Harry still hesitated, and Bellbar gently said:

"Come!"

They had gone but a block when a voice caused the detective to turn quickly.

Then he exclaimed:

"Oh! it's you, Mr. Inspector!"

He had recognized an officer high in detective circles. But wonder followed the discovery when he saw with the latter the well-known face of Ace High and Old Nat Hicks.

"What are you doing, officer?" the inspector asked.

Bellbar glanced at Hicks.

"Speak freely."

"I have just arrested this young man for robbing Nat Hicks, yonder," Bellbar explained. The inspector smiled.

"You are on the wrong track, Bell. He did not rob him; it was another man. That man, one Herman Brown, is now in custody."

Bellbar looked astonished, but Harry's somber face did not lighten up in the least.

"Impossible!" the detective muttered.

"Shall we go over and tell your father all about it?"

"Not there!" Harry cried. "Protect my father, if not me! Save him from knowing what a disgraceful son he has."

"So be it," the inspector answered, with unexpected kindness. "Come to the hotel!"

He pointed to a building a few rods away. All went there; a private room was engaged, and they sat down to give mutual explanations.

"You lose the honor of having caught the stealer of Mr. Hicks's money," continued the inspector, "but it is not for me to wear the laurels. The glory belongs to this youth, Ace High!"

"It was all in the way of business, sir," replied Ace, modestly.

"Remarkable good business it was. This boy, Bellbar, should henceforth be called *The Messenger Trump*! He has done some of the neatest detective work outside professional ranks. On information given by him we have arrested Herman Brown and his ally in crime, Bartholomew Ward, and the former is the real robber. More than that, enough money was found on him to make Hicks's losses good. Nearly all of it was undoubtedly the same that was taken from Hicks."

"I reckon that's so," added Old Nat.

"This is not all that our Messenger Trump has done. Having overheard a fellow called 'Red' Tribbs confess that it was he and a confederate who broke into Marker, Gane & Leigh's store, he gave us tidings, and that gang is locked up. Honors fall thick upon Asa!"

"He deserves them, too!" Old Nat declared.

"Gentlemen," Ace returned, "I owe a good deal to luck, but, since you will praise me, I'll admit I am very glad I've done these jobs."

The inspector turned to Bellbar.

"You will see by this that there is no charge against Tildrake. Of course he goes free."

"I'm not sorry, if I do lose a case," the detective declared.

The inspector took his departure, and Bellbar then congratulated Harry formally.

"Say nothing!" young Tildrake cried. "I am as bad off as ever. I will carry my secret no longer. Though innocent in one case, I am guilty in another. I am a thief!"

"Gracious Peter!" muttered Hicks.

"For a long time," Harry went on, rapidly. "I have been betting on the races, and mad to win. Last Tuesday I had a tip which I thought a dead sure thing, but had no money to wager. I stole it! Unknown to the firm of Marker, Gane & Leigh, I took from their safe the three hundred dollars they had left there. I wagered it, and lost. That night I met Herman Brown at the boarding-house, and he offered to loan me a sum of money which he said my friends had made up as a purse for me—a general, friendly

loan. Fool that I was, I did not suspect that he had just stolen it from Nat Hicks."

No one broke the silence which followed, and Harry soon went on:

"The next morning, when I went to the store, I found the safe open. I knew the combination anyway—the firm were not aware of the fact—and was prepared to replace the money. I did so. This explains why the burglars there got no money, and why money was found there after their visit. Imagine my despair later, when I learned that the money given me by Brown was stolen from Hicks. In my case I had covered one theft with another! Yes; I took money from my employers. Fool that I was, I thought I would surely win on the races and return it. Yet I am just as much a thief. Bellbar, arrest me!"

The unhappy young man broke down entirely, but Nat Hicks leaped to his feet.

"No, no!" he cried. "It shall not be! I'll die, first!"

Despite his own misery, Harry looked at the old woodsman, surprised at his emotion.

"Boy," Nat added, "who was your mother before she married yer father?"

"Alice Maynard."

"She was my own sister!"

"Your sister?"

"Yes. I only learned it this evenin', when Ace happened ter mention the fact. I was born a Maynard, but took the name o' Hicks ter oblige an uncle o' mine. Boy, I'm yer uncle! See you go ter prison? Never! never!"

Ace moved to Bellbar's side.

"Can't it be fixed?" asked the young messenger.

"How can it?"

"Marker, Gane & Leigh are no money out. Why not let Harry resign his situation and leave them? Mr. Hicks is the only loser, and I know he won't mind the loss of the three hundred. Why not save Palmer Tildrake all knowledge of this? Why not save Harry, when he is at a point to reform wholly?"

Asa spoke eloquently. Bellbar was a kind man at heart, and was much interested in this case.

He meditated, and then answered:

"I'll agree on condition that Mr. Marker is told of this. I owe something to my professional office. But Mr. Marker is a kind man; he will overlook the fault and let Harry resign. As for Brown and Ward, they dare not say a word against Tildrake. I know a secret of theirs they will not want revealed. Brown must do time for robbing Hicks, but, in order to have his other crimes held back by me, he will refrain from mentioning Harry's name."

"This is immense!"

"I believe it is. I think Harry is really penitent. We'll give him a chance to save his honor—pray Heaven he will forsake his evil companions and evil ways. We will speak to him."

They went to the other side of the room, where Old Nat was still clasping Harry's hand fondly in the joy of having found a nephew.

Bellbar did not fail to gain his point. Mr. Marker was glad to give Harry another chance in life. The clerk resigned and went away, not with a recommendation, but with no taint on his character.

"Red" Tribbs and his fellow-burglar went to Sing Sing. Captain Tribbs died in India, so he was never tried for abducting Asa and Old Nat.

Brown and Ward were tried, convicted and sentenced heavily. Bellbar had seen Brown, and the latter did not speak the name of Tildrake during his trial.

Harry secured a new position, and surprised every one by a complete reform. His delighted father became very proud of him, and in the years that have passed has never since had his faith shaken. Harry is living an upright, honorable, successful life.

From Brown's accumulated funds Nat Hicks received every dollar of his lost money. He did not go to England, but settled in New York, near his relatives.

Why his sister, the first Mrs. Palmer Tildrake, dropped the old folks in England so abruptly could never be known, but, as she developed some mental oddities after her marriage, and never spoke of relatives, it is believed she had the fever severely and never fully recovered.

Asa High did no more detective work, but applied himself so energetically and conscientiously to his chosen line of business that, though still young, he has a high position in the telegraph service. Old Nat remains his warm friend, and refers to him always as his Trump-Card Detective.

THE END.

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41 Lasso Jack, the Young Mustang.
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178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
221 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
248 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy; or, Old Caleb Arbuckle.
300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
384 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Rancher.
409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
417 Webfoot Moose, the Tramp Detective.
457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
468 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
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552 Don Barr, the Plains Freelance.
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828 Poker Jack, the Detective Sport.

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47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captain.
64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk; or, Old Powder-face.
94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
128 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack from Red Core.
188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy; or, The Mad Hunter.
198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tom's Crusade.
231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowie.
267 The Buckskin Detective; or, The King of Road-agents.
279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowls Blade of Cochetopa.
302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bully.
316 Old Eclipse, Tramp Card of Arizona.
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336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the La so.
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358 Old Red Eye; or, The Terrible Six.
366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
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461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
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499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
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538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
548 Dodger Dick's Doublet; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
558 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
568 Dodger Dick, the Boy Viceroy; or, The Gang of Three.
578 The Two Shadows; or, Dodger Dick's Stop Game.
594 Dodger Dick's Drop; or, The Man from Jersey.
594 Little Lon, the Street-Snark Detective.
610 Old Skinner, the Gold Shark; or, Tony Sharp on Guard.
624 The Champion Pardas; or, The Lucifer of Silver Bar.
637 Dick Dean, the Dock Boy Detective.
645 Kib, the Pavement Sharp.
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297 The Tarantula of Taos; or, Giant George's Revenge.
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318 Ker-whoop, Ker-whoop; or, The Tarantula of Taos.
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332 Eric Fred; or, The Tonkaway's Trust.
344 The Fighting Trio; or, Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway.
349 Wild Wolf; or, Big-Foot Wallace to the Front.
357 The Ranch Ralder; or, The Siege of Fort Pargatory.
361 Snap-Shot, the Boy Ranger.
375 Ohlota, the Creek; or, The Three Thunderbolts.
381 Bandera Bill; or, Eric Frank to the Front.
392 Ramo and the Red; or, The Relegated Ranch.
404 Little Lariat; or, Pecan Pete's Big Rampage.
414 The Daisy from Denver.
427 The Three Trallers; or, Old Rocky on the Rampage.
442 Blue Bill; or, The Lynx of the Leona.
455 Little Lone Star; or, The Belle of the Cibola.
634 Cache Carl, the Chico Giant.

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- 11 The Two Detectives; or, The Fortunes of a Bowery Girl.
76 Abe Colt, the Crow-Killer.
79 Sol Ginger, the Giant Trapper.
288 Joe Buck of Angels and His Boy Pard.
447 New York Nat. A Tale of Tricks and Traps in Gotham.
458 New England Nick; or, The Fortunes of a Foundling.
464 Nimble Nick, the Circus Prince.
498 Taos Ted, the Arizona Sport.
510 Cool Colorado, the Half-Breed Detective.
518 Cool Colorado in New York; or, The Cowboy's Fight.
485 Git Thar Ownce, the Unknown.
492 Git Thar Ownce's Pledge.
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598 Flute, the Singer Detective; or, Ownce in a New Role.
608 The Pitcher Detective's Foll; or, Dan's Double Play.
616 The Ocean Detective; or, The Last Cruise of the Black Bear.
681 The Pitcher Detective's Toughest Tussle.
736 Larry the Thoroughbred; or, Beaten on Every Side.
779 Iron Hand, the Charmed Detective.
854 Uncle Sam's Detective in Chicago.

BY GEORGE O. JENKS.

- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
122 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.
126 Picayune Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
152 Black Bess, Will Wildfire's Racer.
157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
188 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dandy.
235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
262 The Young Sharps; or, Sticking Mike's Hot Trail.
274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
321 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
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352 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
403 Fredly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
428 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
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432 Inevitable Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
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466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Healy.
484 Wild Dick Rockett; or, How He Fought for Honor.
501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Two Sharp for the Sharper.
566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.
627 Tom Bruce of Arkansas; or, The Wolf in the Fold.
655 Plucky Paul, the Boy Speculator.
667 Rob and Sam, the Daisy Detectives.
709 The Curstone Detective; or, Harry Hale's Big Beat.
757 Detective Frank's Sweep-stakes.
869 Ned Norman, the Gamble Broker.

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415 The Vagabond Detective; or, Bowery Bob's Boom.
452 Hotspur Hob, the Street-Boy Detective.
460 The Lawyer's Shadow; or, Luke's Legacy.
472 Jaunty Joe, the Young Horse-King.
494 Surly Slim, the Young Ferryman Detective.
504 Five Points Phil, the Pavement Prince.
509 Jack Jaggars, the Butcher Boy Detective.
516 Tartar Tim; or, Five Points Phil's Menagerie.
526 North River Nat, the Pier Detective.
533 Wrestling Rex, the Pride of the Sixth Ward.
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744 Dick of the Docks, the Night Watch.
765 Flipper Flynn, the Street Patrol.
771 Foxy Fred's Odd Pard; or, The Keeper's Huge Hustle.
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824 Bowery Billy, the Bureo Bouncer.
837 The Big Four of the Bowery.
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211 Crooked Cale, the Callahan of Celestial City.
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319 The Black Rider; or, The Horse-Thieves' League.
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419 Kit Fox, the Border Boy Detective.
625 Chinapin Dan, the Boy Traller.
677 Chinapin Dan's Second Trail.
688 Chinapin Dan's Home Stretch.
698 Old Crazy, the Man Without a Head.
708 Light-Heart Lute's Legacy.
718 Light-Heart Lute's Last Trail.
723 Silverblade, the Shoshone.
729 Silverblade, the Half-blood; or, The Border Beagle at Bay.
739 Silverblade, the Hostile; or, The Border Beagle's Trail.
748 Silverblade, the Friendly; or, The Border Beagle's Boy Pard.

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- 469 The Rival Giants of Nowhere.
498 Cactus Burr, the Man from Hard Luck.
537 Old Buckeye, the Sierra Shadow.
564 Powder Phil, the Boy Miner; or, The Man Without a Past.
609 Holly Dorrit, the Veteran Detective.
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- 129 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Gorgon's Gulch Ghost.
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- 362 Deadwood Dick's Claim.
- 405 Deadwood Dick in Dead City.
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- 421 Deadwood Dick in New York; or, A "Cute Case."
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- 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Round-Up.
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- 549 Deadwood Dick, Jr., on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Afloat.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deceit.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Nevada.
- 630 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in No Man's Land.
- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr., After the Queer.
- 642 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Buffalo.
- 648 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Chase Across the Continent.
- 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Among the Smugglers.
- 660 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Insurance Case.
- 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Back in the Mines.
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- 678 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Discovery; or, Found a Fortune.
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- 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dollars.
- 695 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Danger Divide.
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- 734 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Deal.
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- 782 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dark Days.
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- 792 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Device.
- 797 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Desperate Venture.
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- 828 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Scoop.
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- 866 Spotter Bob's Bowery Racket.

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- 285 Denver Doll's Decey; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
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- 379 Yreka Jim's Prize; or, The Wolves of Wake-Up.
- 385 Yreka Jim's Joker; or, The Rivals of Red Ness.
- 389 Yreka Jim's New Role; or, Bicycle Ben.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
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- 412 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
- 444 Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret; or, A Sister's Devotion.
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- 453 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 458 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
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- 49 Death-Face, Detective; or, Life in New York.
- 69 The Boy Detective; or, Gold Rifle, the Sharpshooter.
- 96 Watch-Eye, the Detective; or, Arabs and Angels.
- 117 Gilt-Edged Dick, the Sport Detective.
- 145 Captain Ferret, the New York Detective.
- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
- 226 The Arab Detective; or, Snoozer, the Boy Sharp.
- 291 Turk the Boy Ferret.
- 325 Kelley, Hickey & Co., the Detectives of Philadelphia.
- 348 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Detective.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Slabside, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
- 434 Jim Benk and Pal, Private Detectives.
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- 579 Broadway Billy's Surprise Party.
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- 711 Broadway Billy at Santa Fe; or, The Clever Deal.
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- 738 Broadway Billy's Curious Case.
- 753 Broadway Billy in Denver.
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- 769 Broadway Billy, the Retriever Detective.
- 775 Broadway Billy's Shadow Chase.
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- 786 Broadway Billy's Team; or, The Combine's Big Pull.
- 790 Broadway Billy's Brigade; or, The Dead Alive.
- 796 Broadway Billy's Queer Request.
- 800 Broadway Billy Baffled.
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- 815 Broadway Billy's Bank Racket.
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- 833 Broadway Billy's Raid.
- 839 Broadway Billy's Big Boom.
- 844 Broadway Billy's Big Bulge.
- 849 Broadway Billy's \$100,000 Snap.
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- 868 Broadway Billy Shadows London Slums.
- 874 Broadway Billy's French Game.
- 880 Broadway Billy and the Bomb-Throwers.
- 886 Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery; or, The Golden Keys.
- 889 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
- 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name.
- 424 Cibuta John, the Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
- 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
- 467 Maco Dan, the Daisy Dude.
- 506 Redlight Ralph the Prince of the Road.
- 524 The Engineer Detective; or, Redlight Ralph's Resolve.
- 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
- 571 Air-Line Luke the Young Engineer; or, The Double Case.
- 592 The Boy Pinkerton; or, Running the Raceable Out.
- 615 Fighting Harry the Chief of Chained Cyclones.
- 640 Bareback Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
- 647 Typewriter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
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- 882 New York Nat's Crook-Chase.
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- 835 Dick Doom's Big Hunt.
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- 766 Dashing Charlie, the Rescuer.
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- 697 Redfern at Devil's Ranch; or, The Sharp from Texas.
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- 656 Butterfly Billy's Man Hunt.
- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
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- 586 Kent Kingdon's Doom; or, The Buckskin Avenger.
- 545 Laffite Run Down; or, The Buccaneers of Barrataria.
- 559 Laffite's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
- 555 Laffite's Confession; or, The Crook Cornair.
- 529 Buckskin Bill, the Comanche Shadow.
- 525 The Buckskin Brothers in Texas.
- 539 The Buckskin Bowers; or, The Cowboy Pirates.
- 535 The Buckskin Bowers; or, The Prairie Fugitive.
- 540 The Buckskin Pard's Quest; or, Captain Ku-Klux.
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- 507 The Royal Middy's Luck; or, The Hunted Midshipman.
- 511 The Royal Middy's Foe.
- 450 Wizard Will; or, The Boy Ferret or New York.
- 454 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
- 474 Wizard Will's Pard; or, Flora, the Flower Girl.
- 478 Wizard Will's Last Case; or, The Ferrets Afloat.
- 429 Duncan Dare, the Boy Refugee.
- 433 Duncan Dare's Plot; or, A Cabin Boy's Luck.
- 437 Duncan Dare's Prize; or, The Sea Raider.
- 441 Duncan Dare's Secret; or, The Ocean Fire.
- 409 Isodor, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
- 407 Isodor's Double Chase; or, The Boy Insurgent.
- 412 Isodor's War-Cloud Cruise; or, The Wild Yachtsman.
- 216 Bison Bill, the Prince of the Plains.
- 222 Bison Bill's Clue; or, Grit, the Brave Sport.
- 804 Dead Shot Dandy's Bluff.
- 808 Dead Shot Dandy's Doublet; or, Keno Kit.
- 814 Dead Shot Dandy's Defiance; or, The Boy Bugler.
- 607 Dead Shot Dandy's Chick; or, The River Detective.
- 245 Merle Monte's Leap for Life.
- 250 Merle Monte's Mutiny; or, Brandt, the Buccaneer.
- 364 Merle Monte's Treasure Island.
- 269 Merle Monte the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, "The Gold Ship" Chase.
- 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, The Pirate's Pride.
- 284 Merle Monte's Pledge; or, The Sea Marauder.
- 197 The Kid Glove Sport; or, Little Grit, the Wild Rider.
- 204 The Kid Glove Sport's Doom; or, Buffalo Bill, the Pony Express Rider.
- 885 Dead-Shot Ralph's Ten-Strike.
- 867 Dead Shot Ralph's Drop.
- 878 Deck-Hawk Roy's Big Scoop.
- 825 Mario, the Cowboy Conster.
- 781 Ruth Redmond, the Girl Shadower.
- 686 Orlando, the Ocean Free Flag.
- 617 Ralph, the Dead-Shot Scout.
- 602 The Vagabond of the Mines.
- 597 The Texan Detective; or, The Black Bravos.
- 591 Belmont, the Young Sea-Rover; or, The Avenging Sailors.
- 580 The Outcast Cadet; or, The False Detective.
- 495 Arizona Joe, the Boy Pard of Texas Jack.
- 487 Nevada Ned, the Revolver Ranger.
- 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Conster; or, Pirate in Spite.
- 462 The Sailor Boy Wanderer; or, The Born Guide.
- 446 Haphazard Harry; or, The Sea Scapgrace.
- 398 The Red Clashed Hands; or, The Boy Lieutenant.
- 387 Warpath Will, the Traitor Guide.
- 383 The Indian Pilot; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
- 377 Bonodel, the Boy Rover; or, The Flagless Schooner.
- 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, of the Rio Grande.
- 287 Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain.
- 229 Crimson Kate, the Girl Trailer; or, The Cowboy's Triumph.
- 116 The Hussar Captain; or, The Hermit of Hell Gate.
- 111 The Sea-Devil; or, The Midshipman's Legacy.
- 102 Dick Dead-Eye, the Smuggler; or, The Cruise of the Vixen.
- 75 The Boy Dnellst; or, The Cruise of the Sea-Wolf.
- 62 The Shadow Ship; or, The Rival Lieutenants.
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